CHAPTERS FROM FRANK D. MACCHIA, INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY: DECLARING THE WONDERS OF GOD (forthcoming through Baker Academic Press)

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Introduction:

Declaring the Wonders of God

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2**Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3**They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4**All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them… How is it that each of us hears them in in our own native tongue? …we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues! (Acts 2:1-4, 8, 11).

On the Day of Pentecost there were Jews from many nations who were visiting Jerusalem to celebrate the occasion. Pentecost in ancient Judaism celebrated the granting of the law at Mt. Sinai. But the law itself was only a witness to the new life that God grants by grace, especially in the coming of the Messiah. On this particular Day of Pentecost, that fulfillment is announced as being accomplished! Behind the scene of that Pentecost celebration a grand fulfillment was occurring. It occurred fifty days after Christ’s resurrection. He had appeared to 120 of his followers to grant them a final discourse on the kingdom of God and to commission them for their mission “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:1-8). He then ascended from their midst and took his place at the right hand of the heavenly Father so as to pour forth the promised Holy Spirit to inaugurate his reign and to bring it to fulfillment in the world (2:32-35). When the first Spirit outpouring occurred on that Day of Pentecost, there was a mighty sound of a rushing wind and flames of fire resting on the followers of Jesus as they declared together the wonders of God in tongues that could be understood in the many languages of the world! Many in the audience were amazed that they heard the disciples declare the wonders of God in the native languages of the lands from which they came. Declaring the wonders of God! What a wonderfully diverse and expansive praise; what a wonderfully diverse and expansive witness!

Imagine this, the wonders of God being declared in multiple languages all at once! This was not just *any* prophetic communication of the wonders of God being declared; this was communication *overload!*[[1]](#footnote-1) No one person could have taken it all in! No one community could have grasped it all! It required a large audience from many nations to take it in. This declaration of the wonders of God was implicitly *global* in scope, implying that theology will reflect on the wonders of God in many different contexts, many different languages and cultures. As Amos Yong suggests, Pentecost opened up a cultural hospitality that was remarkably diverse.[[2]](#footnote-2) Daniel Ramirez focuses on the fact that the “linguistic hospitality” revealed at Pentecost subverts the hegemony of dominant languages in the ancient world such as Greek and Latin.[[3]](#footnote-3) This event not only launched the birth of the global church, it launched the task of theology along with it. Theology is one among many wonderful gifts provided to us in the birth of the global church.

As we will note in the pages that follow, theology is “God-talk.” It is speech about the wonders of God that seeks to reflect upon and guide the praise of the church and its witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. The good news is the gospel of who God is and what God has done, is doing, and will do to fulfill the kingdom of God and bring the new creation into being. The home base of theology is the church, its praise and its mission. The global tongues of Pentecost declaring the wonders of God in the above-quoted text is the larger chorus that theology joins and for which theology does its work. These tongues assume that through the redemptive work of Israel’s Messiah the barriers of sin and death that blocked the path to the new era of the Spirit and of the new creation were overcome. The Spirit is now being poured out on all flesh! Israel’s calling to bless the nations is being fulfilled! The renewing work of the Spirit is overflowing the boundaries of Israel and is now flowing in the direction of the nations. God is transforming communication, turning it into a vast revelation of the Spirit and truth. Theology assumes this grand gift of divine self-giving, of divine communication, that brings redemption and renewal. Theology is thus a *global* conversation. No single tongue or context can fully capture the wonderful diversity of the church’s praise and witness. And, yet, there is a single point of reference in the work of the Triune God that unites it all.

We should also bear in mind that the reach of theology is not only global but *eschatological*, meaning that it points to the final and ultimate fulfillment of the new creation in Christ and the work of the Spirit. Not only do the transformed tongues of the church point beyond any one cultural context, it also points ultimately beyond all contexts; history itself is ultimately to be transcended! There is a grand mystery to which theology points that we could never bring adequately to expression! We study, reflect on, and speak theology with humility and stammering lips. We could never speak the final word on the wonders of God, only point meaningfully to that which is presently being revealed to us. What everyone saw and heard at the Spirit’s arrival on the Day of Pentecost implied as much. A sound of a rushing wind recalls the mighty Spirit that hovered over the deep to bring the creation into being in Genesis 1:2, except now at Pentecost it is a new creation lunched by the resurrection of Christ that is being depicted. The flames resting on the heads of the 120 of Christ’s early followers depicted the sanctified speech that had begun to come forth from the mouths of those present. The abundance of the Spirit moves in conformity to the crucified and risen Christ so as to bear witness to a new world coming, the world of the kingdom of God that will bring mercy and justice to all. It will not be the dominant cultural and economic powers of this present world that govern the witness of the church but the work of Christ and the new world that it ushers in! The church in its praise and witness seeks to share the good news of the coming new creation and its presence already in the Spirit being poured forth. Theology reflects on and joins this praise and this witness so as to encourage and guide it.

Theology is not only a church discipline; it is also an academic area of study, which presents us with an array of academic issues worthy of discussion. Readers who are expecting sermons or devotions in the pages that follow may be disappointed. Yet, while exploring the scholarly issues in what follows, I will also attempt to highlight and reflect on the fundamental issues of importance to the praise and witness of the church that undergird theology. Those in search of greater wisdom for their faith will have much to chew on as well! Theology seeks to provoke the mind, satisfy the heart, and guide the steps. May the pages that follow seek with stammering lips to bear witness to the wonders of God in a way that both encourages and guides the larger praise and witness of the people of God.

Ch. 1:

Theology, Scripture, and Context

*Theology as God Talk:*

When I wrote in my introduction that theology is God-talk, I referred primarily to the literal meaning of the term. *Theo* comes from *theos* [θεός] which means “God” and *logy* comes from *logos* [λόγος] which means “word” or “discourse.” Hence, theology is God-talk! Typically, “logy” endings on words depict avenues of study as well as speech that have their own methods in terms of how one goes about gathering research and presenting it. So, one could broaden the term “theology” to refer to an area of study that centers on God, especially on God’s deeds and purposes. With this in mind, some would view theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Theology would be an area of study or research about God that involves disciplined research and *reflection*. Of course, theology is also *communicated* in a way that informs and guides other ways of thinking and communicating the faith of the church. Hence, I refer to theology as God-talk.

As I noted earlier, theology has its home base in the praise and mission of the church but it is also open to various global contexts. In its loyalty to scripture, theology joins the church in its ongoing praise and witness so as to encourage and to guide it. This means that theology is also seeking relevance to many different cultural contexts. This encouragement and guidance that theology offers requires participation in the life of the church as well as a personal spiritual discipline to undergird it. After all, theology seeks to know its subject matter (the wonders of God) *from the inside*. Needed is a spiritual life that conforms to the love of Christ, which is where the wonders of God are most decisively revealed. “Whoever does not love does not know God” (1 John 4:8).

Yet, academic study is important too, since theology uniquely reflects on the wonders of God as an academic field of study. This emphasis on academic study means that theology has a place in the university curriculum, especially in Christian universities and theological seminaries. The life of the church in loyalty to scripture is the primary home base of theology but the secondary place of work is the academy or academic world. Fields of academic study (the world of the academy) with all of the disciplined methods of study and reflection that go with them, play a role in theological reflection as well. Engaging these other disciplines helps theologians better understand scripture and the history of theology in their original contexts. It also helps them understand how to relate the faith to their own contemporary contexts. So, theologians examine the Bible according to its original languages and changing historical/cultural contexts. They study the history of theology in the light of the changing worldviews and social contexts that originally contextualized them. They attempt to bring the contents of the Christian faith to expression in a way that is sensitive to current trends of thinking about the world in relationship to what may be termed ultimate reality. Theology as a distinctive gift to the body of Christ is academic in nature. It is an academic discipline that borrows insights from other areas of study, such as ancient languages, history, philosophy, psychology, or sociology. Amos Yong notes insightfully that different academic methods of study can be likened to different “languages” or modes of construing reality, meaning that to be multi-contextual or multilingual in a way that is faithful to Pentecost requires one learn to appreciate other academic disciplines.[[4]](#footnote-4)

There are of course potential risks involved when theology engages with other academic disciplines that elements of the faith can be compromised, which is why theology must be accountable first to the faith of the church that it seeks to reflect upon and to guide. There is risk involved in any task worth doing, so that alone need not discourage the important work of theology in its interaction with other academic disciplines. The church may require further enlightenment and openness on some of these matters. Historically, there has existed some tension between theology as a discipline of the church, seeking to be faithful to its worship and witness, and theology as an academic field of study that overlaps with other academic areas of interest. Theology has to be both, but it is primarily accountable to the former and only secondarily accountable to the latter. Yet, it is accountable to both. The task of history in particular has shown theologians that all conceptions and expressions concerning God are conditioned and limited by a finite historical and cultural setting. Theology had to be a contextualized reality to be faithful in its witness in speaking to people where they live, move, and have their being. But that same contextuality exposes theology’s limits. A contextual witness can always be questioned and to some extent transcended to meet the needs of a new time and place, but never in a way that abandons its core. This dynamic process of reinterpretation means that theology must be an ongoing task that learns from the past and is always faithful to its core in the gospel. But throughout theology is also always open to a fresh formulation of the truth that strives for faithful contextual relevance.

Academic areas of study such as language, history, philosophy, or sociology have enhanced our understanding of the Bible. Many insights into the Bible and its relevance to contexts of the faith of the church have been gained from study in these secular areas of inquiry. For example, a study of ancient history and culture can show us how intertwined religion was with the culture and politics of ancient peoples mentioned in the Bible, including Israel. Religious idolatry was inseparable from a nation’s quest for wealth and power in those days. The gods of a people were to guarantee their hold on power over others. Erecting and worshipping the idols devoted to these gods were thought to make them “user friendly” towards that end. Idols were not limited to bowing before statues on pedestals! And Israel was not immune to this temptation, as the Old Testament abundantly shows. A knowledge of our own history as a nation, including our global economics and politics, can help us discern how the biblical condemnation of idolatry relates to our context today. How have we as a nation attempted to make God “user friendly” in our own quest for power? How have we misused the Bible to justify the unjust uses of war or the unjust exclusion of people who were viewed as undesirable by a dominant culture?

The overall goal of theology is faithfulness to the biblical message; The desire for the relevance of the message to our time and place is to serve that faithfulness. We will use other academic disciplines to help us better understand our scriptures and our context and we will do so freely with our faithfulness to the foundation of the gospel securely in place. One may use the analogy of ancient statues to illustrate what I mean. Many ancient statues have a base leg that is straight and bears the weight of the statue and a free leg that is bent and serves a more creative though still necessary function. The base leg is foundational and thus stands for the theologian’s devotion to the faith and witness of the church, especially as found in the witness of scripture. The free leg is the theologian’s involvement in secular academic methods and insights, especially as a help in relating the faith to the church’s secular context in service to the mercy and justice of the kingdom of God. The theologian is free to engage and be enlightened by the academy but not in a way that represents a departure from the foundational faith of the church. As I mentioned above, there are many forms of God-talk in the church. What distinguishes theology from them is in part its simultaneous involvement in related academic areas of inquiry, which grant theology its direction as a critical discipline. I often remind my students who join me in my introduction to theology course that this study is not like Sunday School or discipleship training. We will indeed pursue theology in a way that seeks to be faithful to scripture and to the faith and witness of the church but we will also go about our study as an academic discipline that has a history and draws from other academic methods of inquiry.

*Systematic Theology:*

Theology as it is used in this introduction can be more broadly referred to as *systematic theology* because it follows the major doctrines of the faith in systematic fashion. These doctrines are sometimes called *loci*. The term comes from the Latin word “locus” (the plural being “loci”) which can mean “area” such as an area of study. The standard areas or doctrines of study for systematic theologians are taken from those that have been most discussed in the history of theology:

Theology Proper (study of God’s nature and existence)

Christology (study of Christ)

Pneumatology (study of the Holy Spirit; *pneuma* being the Greek term for “Spirit”)

Soteriology (study of salvation; *soteria* being the Greek term for salvation)

Ecclesiology (study of the church; *ecclesia* being the Greek term for church)

Eschatology (study of final purposes; *eschaton* being the Greek term for end or final)

Notice how the top three loci concern God and the three loci that follow deal with God’s purposes and deeds in the world. Theology is still all about *God*, more specifically, the Triune God, the Father as source, the Son as mediator, and the Spirit as perfector of the divine work mediated through and in the Son! The doctrine of the Trinity may thus be said to be the flowering of doctrine, the overall framework in which all theological concerns are discussed. The theologian can study and discuss one of these areas of concern in its own right. The study would still be systematic in the sense that the theologian will attempt to construct a coherent presentation of this area of concern, showing how all of the various elements of their discussion follow a logical sequence and fit together into a coherent whole. If the systematic theologian investigates and discusses all of the loci together, they will not do so in a way that treats each one in isolation from the others. The effort would then be to show how they all fit together into a logical sequence and a coherent whole. The work is also contextually sensitive and relevant. Theology is scientific in that it seeks to be accountable to the revelation given objectively in Christ and in the scriptures. But there is also an artistic quality about theology since it seeks a unique presentation of theology’s coherence, one that is open to a particular context. There is thus room for different systematic theologies that can grace the landscape of the church’s life and both inspire and guide the life and work of the church.

Theology as systematic theology is sometimes called *dogmatics*, especially in Europe. The word, dogma, has a negative connotation in common English usage, usually referring to a narrow-minded or overly biased viewpoint. But the term has a positive meaning in theology, referring to doctrines that are vital to the gospel, like salvation by grace, the deity of Christ, and the atonement through Christ alone. Dogmatics, like systematic theology, treats key doctrines with an eye towards coherence and relevance to culture. Karl Barth’s multivolume *Church Dogmatics* is a massive treatment of key doctrines of the faith from a Reformed perspective (the second branch of the Protestant Reformation next to the Lutheran movement). It is a favorite place to go for theological stimulation among advanced students and accomplished theologians. Systematic theology is doctrinal but it is not doctrine *per se*. Doctrinal statements are formulated by *churches*, tend to be brief, and are erected as guardrails to keep a church faithful in its speech to orthodox or biblically true guidelines. Systematic theology, though doctrinal, reflects and elaborates on the doctrinal concerns of the church in a way that expands upon, illuminates, and critically probes areas of doctrinal concern. It is done by *individuals* and not churches.

Systematic theology is different from biblical studies. Biblical studies tends to be focused on biblical texts or a biblical book with an emphasis on what these texts meant at the time they were written and how they would have been received and understood by their original audiences. We don’t always know much about such things. Of course, the Bible contains stories. There are indeed times when literary analysis of how the biblical texts were constructed as narratives or as other forms of literary expression will play as much if not more of a role as historical research into the original setting in which the scripture was written. Be that as it may, it is still important to note that the Bible was written to original audiences from another time and place. The Bible was thus written by God’s will *for us* but it was not written directly *to us*. As Paul wrote about the earlier stories from the Old Testament, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). This is not to say that the ancient scriptures cannot speak to us with a sense of immediacy in the power of the Spirit. They do! The world of the biblical narrative will draw us in as we identify with its characters and view our world in a fresh light from the vantage point of their challenges, failures, and successes, and, most of all, in the light of how God pursues them by grace. God will indeed speak to our hearts through this text. But if one wishes an in-depth study of scripture that avoids reading our own thoughts into it contrary to the original meaning of the text, we need to be attentive to the results of biblical scholarship. We need to include what the ancient texts were written to say to their original audiences.

*Exegesis* is the science of methodically extracting the meaning of scripture *out of* the text in the light of its original context. *Eisegesis* is wrongly reading our own thoughts *into* the text contrary to its original meaning. We want to be exegetical rather than eisegetical! *Hermeneutics* is the *theory* of biblical interpretation and *exegesis* is the method and *practice* of it. For example, interpreting the parables of Jesus in the light of their original time and place and their literary form is exegesis. But the more philosophical question of what parables were generally crafted to do or how they function is hermeneutics. Hermeneutical questions might ask whether there may be more than one meaning to a parable, whether in this light there are incidental elements to a parable that do not require interpretation. Hermeneuts can also ask broader questions such as the role of narrative in the Bible or how language functions in the process of interpretation.

Biblical studies is also concerned with theology but it focuses on the theological implications of a certain text or biblical book. Biblical scholars are bound to the text and they tend to be cautious about grand sweeping theological conclusions, a caution that systematicians need to consider in their important work of grander theological construction. However, biblical scholars who are theologically inclined sometimes write volumes describing the theology of a biblical book or author, even the diverse theology of an entire Testament (Old or New). Though biblical theologians will sometimes draw general conclusions about a book, author, or Testament, they are especially attuned to the uniqueness or diversity of voices in the Bible. Systematicians who construct broad theological visions need to be attentive to the results of biblical scholarship. Systematic theology has to be biblically based and should seek to be accountable to scripture in all that it says.

*Church history* deals with the history of churches, movements, and key theologians in the light of their historical settings. *Historical theology* focuses on theological developments rather than historical and institutional realities involved in the diverse journey of the churches over the centuries. Systematic theologians study historical theology because the doctrinal issues discussed by systematicians have a history that offers insights that may be useful when discussing what these doctrinal concerns mean for us today. There is a storehouse of wisdom accumulated in the tradition of the church that can be helpful in dealing with challenges to the faith today. Grand liturgical texts, creeds, confessions, and works of significant theologians can speak to us today in our own effort to be faithful to the biblical message in our time.

The church was undivided for its first thousand years. During this time, theological developments throughout the Roman Empire differed between the Latin-speaking West and the Greek-speaking East; they were taking somewhat different paths theologically and deep cracks were forming in their relationship, but they were still one church. The great schism or divide between these two streams occurred over the span from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. The Eastern Orthodox churches (East) and the Catholic Church (West) trace their histories to this divide and to the roots of each tradition before that. Theologically, the churches of the East emphasized the problem of mortality or death; salvation is primarily viewed as mortal beings partaking of Christ’s immortal life. Christ’s death and resurrection mediate that victory to us. There is a strong accent on the gift of the Spirit and “theosis” or participation by the Spirit in God’s life. Forgiveness of sins is viewed as a subordinate element of salvation. In the Catholic West, however, the problem of sin is stressed; salvation comes primarily through atonement by which the guilt and condemnation of sin are removed. Forgiveness of sins is key. Immortal life is a consequence of this or the more subordinate point. The gift of the Spirit thus tends to play a more subordinate role in the West. The two traditions need each other.

In the West, the Protestant Reformation broke from the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century in order to stress salvation *by* *grace through faith alone* (rather than by grace through faith working in love), *by* *Christ alone* (rather than Christ and the church), and according to *scripture alone* as the supreme standard of truth (rather than scripture and tradition). Martin Luther from the German empire was arguably the major figure in the Reformation originally, though he had forerunners. His emphasis was on justification by grace (by Christ) through faith alone. Reformers from other places in Europe (like John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli) joined the nascent Protestant movement even though they had some theological beliefs (besides those just mentioned) that were not exactly the same as Luther’s (such as differing views on the Lord’s Supper). They came to be called the Reformed tradition as distinct from the Lutheran churches. The Presbyterian churches, for example, locate themselves in the Reformed tradition. The Anglican Church (Church of England) (called in the US, the Episcopal Church) is also a branch of the Protestant churches, though one could argue that it had its own distinct identity within the Catholic Church even before it joined the Protestant movement in the sixteenth century. The Anglican tradition cherishes diversity theologically; the church is a many-branched reality. The Wesleyan and Methodist churches trace their heritage to that root. The Wesleyan tradition elevates sanctification or our consecration by God to the holy life as a point of emphasis (as does the Reformed tradition to some extent). There were also so-called radical Reformers (called anabaptists) who pushed for the separation of the church from the state, which the mainstream Reformers in the sixteenth century rejected since they relied on the state (or rulers within it) to resist the power of the Catholic Church. This radical Reformation tradition is sometimes called the “free church” tradition. Their focus is on faithful discipleship above all else. Mennonite churches trace their heritage to this root. Baptist churches have a Reformed and an anabaptist influence. Pentecostals have a Wesleyan and a Reformed influence. And so the list goes on. One may view the different church families as gifted with unique points of emphasis. Like different gifts within a local congregation, so also on a global scale different church families with their unique points of emphasis can edify the entire people of God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Most of the many church denominations that splintered from one another did so in the modern era and mostly on American soil. But the trend over the last half century has been in the direction of uniting splintered churches under larger umbrellas. The *ecumenical movement* which strives for the visible unity of the churches (not necessarily or even typically conceived of as a world church), has influenced this development. It was inspired by the modern emphasis on missions. It is important to point out here that the diversification of churches is not necessarily negative in and of itself. This is a good thing, so long as the churches maintain a sense of common faith and practice that the world can see. It’s the toxicity of divisiveness and the thought that one’s church is the only true church (denying any sense that other churches or communities of faith participate in Christ) that is to be avoided. Here is where one must balance a passion for truth with a tolerance for difference of viewpoint and practice. There are essentials such as salvation by grace, the deity of Christ, and the exclusivity of salvation through Christ’s death and resurrection alone that cannot be compromised and may thus be cause for division if denied. Theologians can help us discern whether newer formulations concerning these doctrines are faithful enough to scripture to make division unnecessary.

Indeed, not all doctrinal issues are important enough to be church dividing. Truth is always important but different truths carry different weight. For example, whether or not a person can fall from grace (backslide) is a family squabble among Evangelical Christians, an disagreement that can feasibly exist within a church denomination or at least among Christian churches that maintain a sense of joint mission and purpose. But whether Christ is divine is not a family squabble. Those who disagree with this point have separated from the Christian tradition in an important way. There is reason here for division. One must never celebrate or relish division. It is and must be painful and grievous. But there are differences serious enough to require it.

Of most importance to theology are the ancient creeds and theological works, especially those that were formulated before the church divided. The *church fathers* of the early centuries such as Irenaeus of the third century, Athanasius and the Cappadocians (Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen, and Basil) of the fourth century, and Augustine and Cyril of Alexandria of the fifth century offer theologians of all traditions gold mines of theological insight. The *Nicene Creed* of the fourth century that affirmed the deity of Christ (true God from true God, begotten not made, of one nature, or *homoousios*, with the heavenly Father) is widely regarded as *the* creed of all creeds. The statement at *Constantinople* later in the century that affirmed the equal deity of the Spirit (who is to be glorified with the Father and the Son) brought to creedal expression the doctrine of the Trinity. Great treatises on the Trinity by the Cappadocians and Augustine offer theologians a deep dive into the issues surrounding the all-important Godhead. The famous *Chalcedonian Definition* of the fifth century affirmed the true humanity of Christ, which existed in distinct but inseparable union with his deity, allowing the church to confess that Christ was *one person*, fully divine and fully human, who was fully involved as the God-Man in all that he did, including his suffering and death. It was not merely Christ’s humanity that experienced death while Christ’s deity (or divine self) looked on. The church fathers commonly stated that Christ as the God-Man suffered death in the flesh “impassibly” or in a way that did not adversely diminish the infinite power of his deity. Christ’s divine and human natures could not act as separate subjects independently of each other. Christ was two distinct but inseparable natures of *one person*.

Modern movements of importance to theology are, for example, the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (stressing the Holy Spirit and the church’s diverse giftedness and missional life), the ecumenical movement for the visible unity of the churches (which also raised to prominence the church’s missional life), The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (1963-66) (which produced documents re-stating in renewed form key areas of Christian doctrine), the social witness of the churches on behalf of the poor and marginalized people of the world (sometimes called liberation theology), and new thinking globally during the demise of colonialism concerning how to think theologically in ways that are not typically Western (sometimes called contextual theology). Historical theology climaxes with the global challenges from many different contexts facing the churches today. Theology as God talk is involved in a vastly diverse conversation today.

Systematic theology also relates to *practical theology* which deals with theoretical issues and strategies for facilitating the process of embodying the gospel among church congregations. Systematic theologians do have an eye towards the practical life of the church. After all, God-talk is not only done with the mouth but also, in a sense, with one’s life. The same is true for the church as a whole. Theology as a special (disciplined and trained) form of God-talk will be done in continuity with a life dedicated to the gospel, to the larger worship and witness of the church. Systematic theology itself could be called a church “practice.” Yet, there is still a difference of method and concern within systematic theology as compared with practical theology. Systematics reflects systematically through the various doctrinal loci, practical theology does not. Practical theology deals rather with areas of church practice other than reflection on doctrine. It may deal with preaching (*homiletics*), teaching (*pedagogics*), counseling, worship, mission, administration, and organizational leadership. For example, the two-volume work entitled, *Leading the Congregation*, by Roger Heuser and Norman Shawchuck, would be an example of practical theology.[[6]](#footnote-6) There is both a ministerial and an academic (research-oriented) side to these concerns but they all exist under the category of practical theology.

It is important to note that there are theologians who reflect on doctrinal concerns and are involved fully in the constructive work of systematic theology but who would not use the label “systematic” to describe their work. To them, our grasp of biblical and dogmatic truth is not final or exhaustive enough to conform to a “system” and any effort to do so will end up denying or adjusting elements of truth in order to make them “fit” into the theologian’s overarching vision. Moreover, these theologians may be more concerned with how theological truth engages the cultural or social context than how neatly or aesthetically it all fits coherently into a creative pattern. Or, they may be oriented towards reflecting on the truths that arise within a narrative framework (that of the Bible and/or the testimonies of the church) than within a more abstract systematic presentation of doctrinal truth. Theology can be a disciplined and constructive (even doctrinal) task without being intentionally “systematic.” In presenting theology as systematic theology, I am indeed sensitive to these concerns. In fact, I welcome them and the creative versions of theology that they produce. They add insight to systematic theology. I do hold that it is possible to incorporate their concerns into systematic theology. For example, one can write an “open” system that that allows for emphases that do not quite fit the theologian’s constructive vision and that allows for there to be voices that suggest alternate ideas than those favored by the theologian or loose ends that are not fully or neatly tied up. But systematic theologians still hold that there is value to a coherent reflection on the doctrinal areas of gospel truth and that such an effort is a legitimate gift to the body of Christ.

*Theological Method:*

*Theological methods*, or the approaches to theology in the modern era, are typically discussed under the following labels:

*Liberal (or progressive) theology*: The name most commonly attached to this approach to theology is the towering theologian of the nineteenth century, the German Reformed theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher came from a Moravian background, which was pietistic. Pietists placed a strong emphasis on religious experience. Schleiermacher gained from them an intense interest in the reach of the soul for God, what he came to call “absolute dependence” on God or “feeling,” which was deeper than a mere emotion. He was taken with the “Romantic” movement, which emphasized the role of human imagination in unifying various elements of culture and areas of academic study. Those belonging to this movement reached implicitly for transcendence, for that which brings unity and meaning to all things. But those who identified with this movement were convinced that the institutional church was irrelevant to their spiritual quest. Schleiermacher wanted to show them that Christian spirituality, rightly understood, was indeed relevant to their spiritual journey. What thus became important about Christianity for Schleiermacher was the “God consciousness” or experience of God that it offers. He connects the fleeting consciousness of God in the world with the more profound God consciousness in the church and he asks why the church has such a spiritual awareness.

The answer for Schleiermacher was Jesus Christ. Christ’s consciousness of God was the ideal; it was entirely at one with divine love in action to the point where Christ’s entire being manifested God. Christ’s redemptive power or influence was entirely in his perfect manifestation of God which he communicates to the church through the presence of the Spirit by which the church fellowships with Christ. Schleiermacher did not locate Christ’s redemptive work decisively at the cross; there was no substitutionary atonement for Schleiermacher and he did not believe in the resurrection, only in the belief that Christ was alive after death as a spiritual influence. But Christ for Schleiermacher did represent humanity before God and in this role offers forgiveness and the power of his perfect unity with God. Since Schleiermacher, liberal theologians have continued to place most of their emphasis on the cultural relevance of Christianity, even if it means radically revising biblically and historically cherished doctrines. It also tends to bypass the need for atonement or resurrection so as to locate Christ’s redemptive influence in his life of perfect unity with divine love. Overall, Schleiermacher made a culturally relevant view of humanity’s spiritual or religious journey the dominant force in his theology. He interpreted Christ’s significance through that lens. Christ became the ideal manifestation of that quest. It was not revelation that shaped experience as much as a culturally relevant experience that shaped Christology.

*Neo-orthodox theology*: The evangelicalresponse to Schleiermacher came most powerfully through the theology of the Swiss Reformed theologian, Karl Barth. Barth taught the bulk of his career at the university of Basel in Switzerland. His approach to theology was commonly called neo-orthodox (a rediscovery of the orthodox or doctrinally true theology of the Reformation), though Barth himself did not prefer this term. Barth dominated theology for most of the twentieth century (he died in 1968), much as Schleiermacher dominated theology in the nineteenth. Barth was trained in Germany under the liberal theology of his day but early on became disillusioned with it. He soon formed the opinion that liberal theology was too concerned with the human spiritual or religious quest interpreted in a way that seemed culturally relevant. This theology was not nearly concerned enough with what the divine revelation given in scripture says about what God has done to save us, what *God* has done to reveal Godself to us in Christ. Liberal theology read the Bible as a guide to the spiritual or religious life, as a way of understanding what the spiritual quest tells us about God in the light of the larger cultural quest for meaning. Barth wanted to shift the center of the Bible to *God and God’s quest for us.* We are to view human religion and cultural context in *that* light. The Bible is not about what human religion tells us about Christ but rather what Christ tells us about human religion, its idolatry and the only thing that can free us from it, and for it. In Barth’s revolution, the atoning death and resurrection of Christ took center stage once more as the interpretive lens through which to view the Bible. We interpret the Bible primarily through the lens of Christ rather than the lens of a culturally relevant view of the human religious quest.

Since the cross and the resurrection interpreted the significance of Christ for us, Christ’s meaning was ultimately transcendent, never entirely graspable by human spirituality. Though we can know Christ and know profound truths about Christ, we are always humble in what we know, always cognizant that we can never have Christ or God at our disposal as the mere element of *our* quest for meaning. There continues to be a *dialectic* or ongoing tension between our knowledge of Christ and the mystery of *his* ongoing transcendence beyond the reach of human reason and religion, beyond the reach of human idolatry or self-serving agendas. His theology was thus called “dialectical theology” in the early decades of its prominence. The power of the Barthian revolution was in making revelation in Christ, especially his atoning death and resurrection, the center and chief standard of theology. This defines religious experience rather than the other way around. Relating this to our cultural context is still important, but never at the cost of faithfulness to revelation.

*Correlation Theology*: The German Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, lived at the same time as Barth. He immigrated to America to escape Nazi Germany and spent most of his career at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He called his approach to theology *correlation theology*. He was convinced that we need a way beyond the dominant alternatives in his day between the liberal theology of Schleiermacher (which sought above all else a culturally relevant view of the spiritual quest) and the Barthian neo-orthodox theology (which highlighted our primary devotion to divine revelation in Christ). *Tillich’s correlation theology was thus a revision of the older liberal theology but with greater emphasis on faithfulness to divine revelation*. Tillich stressed the fact that faith is always correlating revelation and cultural context. This was the case even in the Bible. The biblical authors were at least implicitly sharing revelation from God in a way that was relevant to their cultural context. And as we read the Bible, we are correlating its revelatory symbols with meanings that are culturally relevant. Yet, Tillich’s concern for correlation never entirely escaped liberalism’s overarching concern with the religious quest of the soul’s reach for God. He called faith “ultimate concern” or the soul’s reach *for God*. Barth would have defined faith as shaped by God’s reach *for us* or the revelation of God to us in Christ. Tillich noted that faith as ultimate *concern* is to be “existentially” relevant, following the popular philosophical quest of his day for the meaning of human existence in the world. In a way not too very different from Schleiermacher, Tillich viewed Christ as the ideal human manifestation of divine love, calling him the “New Being” in the world. But Tillich gave more weight than Schleiermacher did to the cross, noting that Christ on the cross overcame human alienation from God for us. Yet, Tillich’s view of the Bible as containing mere “symbols” of the transcendent God that can bear different meanings allowed him to deem some of them as irrelevant or susceptible to radical revision in the light of cultural demands. For example, he ended up denying any realistic sense to the incarnation of the divine Son in flesh. Tillich also exaggerated the charge that Barth did not pay enough attention to cultural context in order to highlight the need for his own approach by way of contrast.

*Liberation theology*: In a post-Barthian theological situation, theology began to take a secular turn, with greater attention than ever before placed on the significance of secular context for theology. Inspiration was taken originally from earlier sources, such as the attention paid to God’s self-disclosure in *history* (rather than the life of the church) by biblical theologians.[[7]](#footnote-7) Another source was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian, who escaped Nazi Germany in the 1930’s for a while to study and then briefly teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York, only to return to Germany to be a force for change during Nazi rule. He ended up being martyred for his effort to do so. While he was imprisoned, he wondered in writing how the church was to make sense of their faith in a world that had “come of age” or come to believe that it had outgrown the need for faith in God as the door to hope in the present situation. In response, Bonhoeffer turned to the cross as the place where God enters the secular world, the place of the absence of faith, in order to make God relevant anew in a world that might come to feel it no longer needs God. Inspired by these trends, Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School in 1965 wrote *The Secular City* in an effort to show the relevance of biblical revelation to an increasingly secular world that is seeking to extricate itself from the narrow and irrelevant ideas of religion.[[8]](#footnote-8) Liberation theology was born from the conviction that such secular theologies needed to focus from the start on human suffering. In particular, the focus needs to be on the *liberation* of people who are being dehumanized by the oppression of social injustice. Latin American liberation theology of the 1970’s emphasized economic injustice and poverty. The primary text here is written by the Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.[[9]](#footnote-9) He was inspired by the trend supported by Latin American Bishops to move beyond merely preaching and distributing sacraments in the hope for life after death in heaven. Gutierrez wished to place his accent on what God wills to do to realize the mercy and justice of the kingdom of God in the world *in history* and to view the church as an instrument in that fulfillment. Black theology in the US was popularized by James Cone of Union Theological Seminary in New York. His classic, *The God of the Oppressed* is the book to read in this area.[[10]](#footnote-10) He focused more on liberation from the dehumanization caused by racism. God’s saving presence is revealed in the liberation of the oppressed in history.

Liberation theology also took on issues of liberation from sexism (as in feminist or, among women of color, womanist theologies). Though God transcends sex distinction, the Bible naturally uses images that are implicitly gender related. Though mostly masculine, some feminist or womanist theologians point to the fact that the Bible sometimes uses feminine images to describe God in relation to God’s people (e.g., Isa. 66:13). But God is not limited by the differences between male and female existence. Sex differences exist among God’s finite creation; as finite, men tend to lack biologically what it takes to be a woman and women tend to lack biologically what it takes to be a man. They are finite, limited by the boundaries of embodied existence. But God has no lack, no limitations, and is not bound by embodied existence. God is infinite and incorporeal. God thus transcends sex difference, is not confined to male or female characteristics. In Genesis 1, humanity shares sex difference with the animal kingdom but not with God. There is no male God with a female deity as a cohort in Israel’s scriptures as was typical of the other religions surrounding Israel in the ancient world. Some will also note that man and woman are in partnership created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26) and that the subordination of Eve is not mentioned until the curse of sin is described (Gen. 3:16). After Christ undoes the curse (Gal. 3:13), the new humanity in Christ is “neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female” (v. 28). Though distinct, they all have equal access to the privileges and responsibilities of the Spirit’s calling and gifting.

Liberation theology is deeply pained by the failure of the church, especially among socially privileged believers, to address the issue of social oppression when discussing sin and redemption. Liberation theologians stressed the need for the church to define itself as the instrument of the mercy and justice of the kingdom of God in the world. Some liberation theologians are quite orthodox in their support of the authority of the Bible, the incarnation of the divine Son in Christ, and the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. They do not deny the promise of eternal life. Others, however, are more liberal in their theology. All, however, stress that sin and redemption are not just personal but more profoundly social realities. They speak of redemption prominently as applied to humanity in the liberation of the oppressed in history. In my view, we are not to deny the secular implications of the gospel for social liberation, nor the need for the church in its witness to Christ to address such issues in favor of divine mercy and justice. But we also need to locate the social meaning of the gospel first and prominently in the life of the *church*. The church is to be the society that signifies social mercy and justice in history. If any of the churches ignore the cries of injustice and suffering in the world, they undercut their witness, their very reason for being.

*Contextual Theologies*: After the waning of colonialism in the twentieth century, many nations and cultures outside the West in places like Africa and Asia began to think about how theology can be done in ways that are relevant culturally *to them*. There are accents that they brought to the theological table that were not typical for dominant theological trends in the West. Kosuke Koyama of Union Theological Seminary in New York wrote, *Water Buffalo Theology* as a classic example of this theological method.[[11]](#footnote-11) He starts with the tension between the ancient Hebrew (and biblical) emphasis on God’s mighty acts of salvation in history and the celebration of the cycles of nature in certain Asian cultures. The biblical picture of salvation history is linear, moving from the past into the present, constantly being challenged by the future coming of the kingdom of God. There are key events that culminate in Christ and have “once and for all” significance over the entire narrative of events. There is protest against evil implied in the story and the crisis decision to accept salvation that the key salvation-historical event offers us. The Asian cycles of nature are by contrast cyclical, moving in repeated cycles without any “once and for all” significance granted to any one of them. There is no protest against evil, only a peace that nature will end up being faithful to sustain us no matter what happens. Koyama notes that the latter is not sufficient to meet the needs of the person’s deepest yearning for salvation. There is a need to protest evil and to be ushered into salvation that Christ offers us. Yet, there is also room within the biblical salvation-historical framework for nature in all of its faithful cycles to be part of a linear salvation-historical narrative fulfilled by Christ. After all, all of nature is to be redeemed in Christ. On the African continent, theologians like Esther Acolatse from Ghana (now at the University of Toronto) writes of the unfortunate tendency for theologians in the West to reject or largely ignore the victory of Christ over the evil spirits, even though this victory plays an important role in the New Testament. The Bible cautions us not to exaggerate the significance of evil spirits, as is often done in African cultures. But neither is the real existence of such spirits and the assurance of victory in Christ to be ignored.[[12]](#footnote-12)

*Postliberal theology*: Postliberal theology was birthed in the 1980’s and beyond at the Yale Divinity School with such scholars as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.[[13]](#footnote-13) Postliberalism takes a stand against liberalism’s assumption that there is a general experience of God in the world that gets symbolized and expressed in different ways. Postliberalism assumes rather that the scriptures and the broader communicative practices of the church (e.g., preaching, sacraments, forms of ministry and moral behavior) actually shape our experiences of God. The language and communication of faith do not *express* experience, they *shape* it. This means that the church’s primary task according to postliberalism is not to be relevant to a general experience of God in the world (since such a thing does not exist) but rather to be the communicative instrument that brings people into an experience of God. It is the practices of the church that guide the interpretation of scripture, not cultural context. It is possible in this approach to theology for secular language to exercise an indirect influence on the church’s language and experience of God. It is then the role of doctrine to guide this influence so that the church remains faithful to its scriptures and general life practices. Postliberalism is correct to grant the scriptures the formative role in people’s experience of God. But granting church practices the means of interpreting scripture tends to blur the line between the voice of scripture and the voice of the church. Evangelical theologian, Kevin Vanhoozer, noted that scripture has its own historical context and its own voice distinct from the church’s interpretive practices, a point not always clear in postliberal theologies.[[14]](#footnote-14) Plus, granting scripture and church witness the formative role in people’s experience of God does not have to deny that there is a capacity to experience God in the world, even in a way that leads to salvation, even though scripture and the witness of the church is granted by God to guide it.

*Norms: Scripture and Tradition:*

Systematic theology has norms or standards that fundamentally guide it. Scripture is the privileged norm of the church; it is not the only norm but it is the privileged or supreme norm or standard. The Reformation principle that informs this conviction is *sola scriptura* or “scripture alone.” I do not mean by this term that *only* scripture guides theology. This idea is called *biblicism*. Biblicists think that it is wrong to draw insight from anything but the Bible. They imagine that all of their beliefs are only drawn from the Bible, which tends to grant them a sense of spiritual superiority over others they might regard as compromising the Bible by taking insights from other sources of wisdom. Biblicism is unrealistic though, since no one is a blank slate, interpreting the Bible with no theological influences from outside of the Bible. It is helpful to become aware of our theological influences, so as to be grateful for those that are helpful and rightly critical of those that are not. Moreover, biblicism denigrates all sources of guidance except scripture, granting scripture a role it was never meant to have. At no point in the church’s history from its very inception did the church ever rely *only* on scripture for guidance. The church received the scriptures from the beginning as their chief or *supreme* source of guidance but never as their *only* source. Sola scriptura thus refers to the scriptures *alone* as the *supreme* measure of the church’s practices, the final court of appeal in the church’s discernment of truth.

The role of *scripture* as the supreme norm in the church has its explanation in the belief that God has not been silent but has self-disclosed in history, for all time fully and decisively in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:1 tells us that God is revealed in the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) “at various times and in different ways” through a prophetic witness but with finality by way of fulfillment through God’s Son, who mediated creation and is heir of all things willed by God for it (1:2). Hebrews goes further to note that in distinction to the prophetic witness of scripture the Son is “the radiance of God’s glory, the exact representation of his being” (v. 3). Scripture in this context is *inspired* (God-breathed) to be the privileged witness to Christ and his gospel in the church and in these latter days. Note what Paul wrote to Timothy: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16). The metaphor at work here is that of breath and word. All words that are spoken require breath. Placing one’s hand near one’s mouth when speaking will reveal that breath is required to speak. By way of comparison, the word of scripture is pictured here as coming forth from the biblical authors on the breath of God, the Holy Spirit. And the word of the scriptures that penetrates our hearts and minds continues to come to us in the power of the Spirit as well.

Timothy was a young pastor who needed to hear this. He was beginning to neglect his gift of preaching and teaching the scriptures because of his inexperience. Perhaps he was being criticized for his lack of maturity at the task. One can read between the lines of the following encouragement from Paul to the young pastor. Paul writes:

Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young… Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress (1 Tim. 4:12-15).

Timothy was young and inexperienced. But he was not to allow anyone to reject him for this. Paul tells him to stick with his gift of preaching and teaching and everyone will see his “progress.” Unfortunately, Timothy did not heed Paul’s advice, for in the first chapter of 2 Timothy, Paul continues to implore Timothy not to neglect his gift but rather stoke it into flame. He was not to be timid in the matter of asserting himself in the exercise of his gift of preaching and teaching (vv. 6-7). Then in chapter 3 of 2 Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy of the powerful and formative role that the scriptures played in his own life in leading him to Christ, as if saying that God will be faithful to do the same in the lives of others through him (v. 15). Then comes our key text about the scriptures being “God-breathed” and useful for all that a minister will do in serving a congregation. The message is clear: The inspired scriptures were to be the strength of Timothy’s ministry. He was to learn to lean on the scriptures as the strong arm of his ministry in all that he will do to motivate, build up, reprove, and guide others.

The inspiration of scripture is *verbal* and not only conceptual. All of scripture is involved. On may thus refer to the *verbal-plenary* view of biblical inspiration (plenary referring to all). But this does not mean that God “dictated” word for word what the authors were to write. There are different writing styles among biblical authors, and Peter concedes that Paul wrote in ways that were sometimes “difficult to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16). One would think that the Spirit could be clearer than that! It might help to view the inspiration of scripture as their *sanctification*, their being set apart and consecrated for a sacred task among the churches. They are set apart eventually as a *canon* or supreme standard for the church’s faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The scriptures were sanctified as themselves the faithful witness par excellence to Christ and his gospel.[[15]](#footnote-15) Peter wrote that we have the prophetic message in scripture “as something completely reliable” (2 Pet. 1:19). The Bible’s witness to truth will not mislead or deceive. Its witness is faithful and true.

The scriptures in their entirety bear witness to Christ and are all fulfilled (summed up) in him, as Hebrews 1:1-3 implies. Jesus stated, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Hebrews elaborates in 10:7 that Christ says to the heavenly Father, “Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.” Reconciliation with creation could not be achieved by Israelite religion or sacrificial system—only the incarnation of the Son in flesh can accomplish this. “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,  but a body you prepared for me” (v. 5). Christ overcomes sin and death so as to redeem creation and make it worthy of the Holy Spirit (“He redeemed us… so that by faith we may receive the promise of the Spirit,” Gal. 3:14). He pours forth the Spirit so as to make all things new as the temple of God’s dwelling. When all things foreshadowed and taught in the scriptures are fulfilled by him, when the new creation comes, the scriptures will be once and for all fulfilled, vindicated as the word of God for history. After claiming that he has come to fulfill the law and the prophets, Jesus continues concerning the entirety of the Jewish scriptures (which would apply to the New Testament as well): “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18).

Christ comes to us wrapped in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. These scriptures in the power of the Spirit point to him and vindicate him as the chosen One sent of the Father in the Spirit to fulfill their witness. But his redemption and renewal of creation in the Holy Spirit fulfills these scriptures and shows them to be true, vindicates them. Christ and the Scriptures are mutually vindicating because they are both brought to material expression by the Spirit. But they are not equals; Christ is the Lord of scripture. Only Christ is divine, only he is in essence (ontologically) and not only by sanctification the revelation of the Father. Christ is alone for all eternity the divine Word of the Father (John 1:1, 14). The scriptures are his primary and authoritative witness. The scriptures function to reveal God in witness to Christ. As it was said of John the Baptist may be said of scripture: “He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light” (John. 1:7). The scripture is a light but only as a reflection of Christ, for Christ alone is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3).

In this context we can best understand 2 Peter 1:19: “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” Notice that the lights here are heavenly bodies. The light that shines in the darkness is contrasted with the sun rising at the dawn. One is tempted to view the light in the darkness as the moon. When the sun rises the light of the moon is no longer needed. When the great light which is Christ appears, the lesser light of the scripture is outshined. “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Notice that when Christ the great light appears the morning star also rises in our hearts, perhaps a poetic description of our rising in resurrection in Christ’s image. When Christ the great light appears to finally fulfill the scriptures once and for all time, we fulfill them too in our rising. From our perspective, the scripture as the moon is such a fitting metaphor since it reflects the light of the sun. So also, the scriptures reflect the light of Christ, reflect the glory of the Father that shines forth from him, transforming us more and more into his image. “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). We currently hold this treasure in vessels of clay but the day is coming in which we will hold it in bodies shaped into the image of the exalted Christ. Until then, the strength of the risen Lord sustains us (2 Cor, 4:7-11).

For all of their faithfulness and power in the hands of the Spirit, the scriptures are still a finite witness using human conceptuality and language. God must stoop low to accommodate such a witness as this! “To whom will you compare me?” says the. Lord (Isa. 40:25). Even the noblest images and descriptions of God in scripture, though as faithful as a human witness can be, fall short of God’s infinite glory. Theologians call scripture *anthropomorphic*, describing God using language and concepts drawn from the realm of finite human life. This doesn’t mean that the Bible fails to realistically depict who God is and what God is like. But this is the point. The Bible shows what God is *like*, the scripture being at best *analogous* to the transcendent divine reality. Jesus is God’s way of self-imaging in the world; the scriptures give us the best presentation available to us of his impact and glory. Since Christ is the Lord of Scripture and all scripture is fulfilled in him, he should be viewed as the chief subject matter of all scripture, the “canon within the canon” (or standard within the standard) so to speak by which the overarching sense (central message or gospel) of scripture is understood. Any interpretation of scripture must pass the test of Jesus Christ to be legitimate. It must conform to Christ to be valid.

Scripture is a *canon*, which means standard, as noted earlier, supreme standard. The boundaries of the Old Testament canon were uncertain at the time of Jesus. About three hundred years before Christ the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) was translated from Hebrew into Greek, because many Jews were living in Gentile lands that spoke Greek which was widely spoken at that time. The translation came to be called the *Septuagint*. The translators at that time added books to the translation which came to be called the *Apocrypha*. The Apocrypha was more accepted outside of Palestine among Greek-speaking Jews than within Palestine. Eventually, Judaism came to reject these books as part of their canon. In the Christian church their reception was more favorable, but, even then, acceptance was never universal. Some in the early centuries considered them of devotional value but not on the same level as scripture.[[16]](#footnote-16) This was Luther’s stance on the matter. Most Protestants came to reject them while Catholics accepted them. The fact that Catholic Bibles contain the Apocrypha as part of their Old Testament is today the only substantial difference between Catholic and Protestant Bibles. The fact that the Apocrypha never gained the kind of universal acceptance enjoyed by other canonical books speaks against their canonicity.

The New Testament canon was in formation very early and was inevitable. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told his disciples to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (28:19). One is reminded here of the many tongues at Pentecost signaling the rise of the global church. Except at the end of Matthew, Jesus said that converts should be taught all that he had commanded them and that he would be with his church as they undertook this task to the very end of the age (28:20). How was the church to teach all that Jesus taught until the end of the age unless his teachings were written and preserved in the form of a canon or standard of instruction? Christ’s presence with his church until the end of the age would surely guide the process of forming such a canon! As so, the New Testament canon was formed.

Paul, the earliest writer of the New Testament, refers to the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) as the παλαιᾶς διαθήκης or *old covenant* (one may say, Old Testament) (2 Cor. 3:14). The new covenant Paul had in mind was Christ’s covenant with his church, but the fact that Paul’s reference to the “old covenant” in this verse was a body of scripture, the door was wide open for a new covenant canon of scripture built on Christ that completes the scriptures. The first one to mention a New Testament canon that we know of was the church father, Ireneaus, in the second century.[[17]](#footnote-17) Some have taught that the New Testament canon was formed to correct the inadequate canon put together by the heretic, Marcion that was a truncated New Testament canon consisting of an expunged version of Luke’s Gospel and some of Paul’s letters.[[18]](#footnote-18) There is evidence that Paul, the earliest author of the New Testament, wrote with the authority of scripture, as though he knew that his writings would gain that status. Notice what he wrote to the Corinthian prophets: “If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored” (1 Cor. 14:37-38). The gift of prophecy in the churches, even if seemingly spoken by the power of the Spirit, must be tested in the light of scripture to be vindicated as valid. The scripture is the privileged standard of truth. We should not be surprised that 2 Peter 3:16 referred to Paul’s writings as “scripture” already within the context of the first century.

Yet, Paul’s letters alone were not sufficient to complete the New Testament canon. There is very little in his letters about the conception, birth, life or teachings of Christ, nor the drama of his death and resurrection as it actually transpired. The church was indeed to be taught *all* that Christ had commanded according to Matthew 28:20! The Gospels were needed to fill in this background. Mark was the first Gospel written (ca. 70 CE), since there is a dependence on it evident in Matthew and Luke. Luke informs us that “many accounts” were drawn up of what transpired in the life and mission of Christ but that he did thorough research including among eyewitness testimonies “that you may know with certainty the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4, see vv. 1-3). John was most likely written afterwards.

The fact is that the bulk of Paul’s letters, the four Gospels, and Acts were most likely accepted as authoritative very early. The fact that Irenaeus in the second century quotes 206 times from Paul’s letters and the Gospels prefaced by the phrase, “the scripture says” implies that they were already a collection.[[19]](#footnote-19) In the fragment of the so-called “Muratorian canon” of the late second century, we find a list of New Testament books that contains all of the New Testament books familiar to us except Titus, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter and III John. The canon listed by the church father, Origen, in the third century omits these latter two books as well as Titus, Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Jude. Eusebius at the end of the third century omits Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude (he includes Titus). In the fourth century (367 CE), the church father, Athanasius, includes in his Easter Letter all of the New Testament books familiar to us.[[20]](#footnote-20)

There are a few conclusions that can be drawn from this evidence. First, among Paul’s letters, only Titus is disputed. None of the Gospels and not Acts, the narrative foundation of the New Testament, is ever doubted. What this means is that the four Gospels, Acts, and Paul’s letters represented from early on the undisputed backbone of the New Testament canon. They are never omitted from among different sources throughout the second to the fourth centuries. Unless one wishes to believe that the list of New Testament books from the late second century Muratorian canon and quoted from decades earlier by Irenaeus was composed out of thin air, the implication is that the backbone of the Gospels, Acts, and Paul’s letters goes back to the early second century, perhaps within one or two generations of the time these books were composed. Second, most of the books that were typically omitted in the second and third centuries (Titus, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude) were widely known and accepted by parts of the church at that time. The very fact that the canonical lists mentioned above would include “1 John” without listing 2 and 3 John or “1 Peter” without listing 2 Peter is proof that they themselves were aware that there was a 2 and 3 John and a 2 Peter that were widely known. Why list it as 1 John as “first” if there is not at least a second? Third, Hebrews had difficulty gaining acceptance because its authorship was unknown (meaning it did not carry the name of an apostle or someone known by an apostle). But its stunningly rich and insightful theological content almost guaranteed its eventual acceptance.[[21]](#footnote-21) The edges of the New Testament canon were in dispute but the bulk of it seems to have been in place from early on. The idea popular in some circles today that the New Testament canon was wide open until the Council of Nicea in the fourth century composed a list to keep out writings thought to be heretical is pure fiction.

John Webster rightly points out that the Holy Spirit guided not only the writing but the canonization of the inspired New Testament writings. The churches may be said to have “received” and approved these books rather than selected them.[[22]](#footnote-22) As the early leaders of the church said of the acceptance of Gentile converts by grace alone, so may we also say of the Spirit’s leading concerning the formation of the canon, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). As we noted above, Christ asked the church to pass on all that he had commanded, and he followed this request by promising that he will remain with them until the end of the age towards this end (Matt. 28:20). Surely his presence with the church guided them in preserving the canon that contains all of those commands. One has good grounds for believing that Christ fulfilled that promise.

The relationship between scripture and *tradition* needs to be addressed as well, since spiritual discernment in the church by the Spirit surely involves the rise of tradition that serves and illuminates scripture. But such illumination is not simply to be assumed in every case. Just as prophecy in the church (and other charismatic gifts) needs to be tested in the light of scripture to be accepted as valid, so must tradition in the history of the church. However, tradition should not be viewed as in itself a negative term (as in the worn-out statement, “We accept scripture and not the traditions of men”). Not all traditions are nonbiblical! There is much in the tradition of the church that serves to illuminate scripture and apply it to new situations. In fact, there is evidence of very early “tradition” (confessions, hymns, prayers) taken from the church within the Bible itself. Note the hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 or the creedal statement implied in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. Prior to Christ, the Psalms is a collection of Israel’s hymns! But post-canonical tradition, as valuable as it may be, is still subordinate to the Bible and must prove its worth in service to it, which is the point to be made here. As noted above, when the Protestant Reformation affirmed “sola scriptura” (scripture alone) it did not mean that tradition is not a source of truth and a norm of faith. It is! There are creeds, confessions, liturgies, and great theological works that have helped the church at key moments of its history to understand more deeply the meaning of scripture for their time and place. The Reformers just meant that scripture is alone the final court of appeal and that tradition in its use in illuminating scripture must show that this is indeed what it’s doing.

The Catholic church of today does indeed affirm the fact that tradition serves scripture. The Second Vatican Council helpfully notes that the teaching office behind much of the post-canonical traditions of the church “is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit” (*Dei Verbum*, #10). The difference from Protestantism is the Catholic confidence that such tradition *will* serve scripture faithfully and should therefore be revered in a way that is equal to our reverence for scripture. Protestants do not share this confidence and for good reason. Their very origin as a movement was due to a failure of Catholic tradition to live up to scripture at that point in time. They, of course, were not the only ones who failed! That failure was shared in some ways by Protestants too! But that is precisely the point. The greatness of the Protestant movement is in its conviction that all churches throughout the world in all of their diversity must return to the scriptures again and again with a fresh ear to hear what may be neglected or betrayed in the current moment. Theology in its faithfulness to scripture must help the church to do this again and again.

*Final Reflection:*

The term theology literally means God-talk. It is speech about God that informs and guides how the church speaks about God. Theology is not the only speech about God in the church that does this. There are preachers, teachers, and prophets who do this too. But theologians are trained to speak about God in a way that even informs and guides *them*. Theology in this volume is systematic theology, which proceeds systematically through the major doctrinal loci (areas of doctrine) in a way that shows their coherence and faithfulness to the gospel. Systematic theology is sometimes called dogmatics. It differs from doctrine in that the latter represents brief statements of belief crafted by churches or denominations to regulate the church’s practices. Systematic theology is done by individuals who reflect on and explain these doctrinal statements or doctrines in general appreciatively and critically in the light of scripture. Systematic theology is to be done in humility and openness to diverse voices, especially those that cry out for the mercy and justice of the kingdom of God from the margins of society. It is to participate in the cultural hospitality of Pentecost. It is to be based in the faith, worship, and witness of the church, loyal especially to the scripture’s witness to Christ, and, in being faithful, remain also intimately engaged in the contexts of its time and place.

Biblical scholars are more or less interested in theology too but their theological concern is focused much more narrowly on a given biblical text or book in terms of the theological issues that were at play in the book’s formation and message to its original audience (or in the formation of the biblical tradition that may span more than one book). Biblical theology may have a wider and more prominent theological concern, even covering an entire testament. But even here the effort is not so much constructing a systematic statement of truth as attending to the diverse voices that come to expression throughout the span of the biblical material being examined. Church historians are also more or less interested in theology. But they also have a more focused concern that is less constructive. They wish to understand the theological issues at stake in a given time period, movement, church, or thinker. Historical theology has a more prominent and broader theological interest, but it is again focused on the theological developments at work in the history of the church. Systematic theology learns much from these other theological disciplines but its interest is in standing back and asking what the church is to believe today in the various areas of doctrine most important to the Bible and the history of the church. And the theologian seeks to explore and discuss these areas so as to construct a systematic presentation of the church’s faith, the big picture of truth so to speak, in a way that shows its inner coherence, its biblical faithfulness, and its contextual relevance.

Modern theological method has struggled with the issue of scripture and context. Liberalism has allowed for radical redefinition of scripture and doctrine so as to be relevant to a general cultural understanding of the world in relation to the ultimate. They dismiss doctrines like the atonement and the resurrection of Christ in order to make the influence of his life the key to his redemptive influence. Karl Barth’s neo-orthodoxy has sought to make faithfulness to the biblical witness to revelation the church’s supreme loyalty. It is not Christ’s influence on us that interprets the significance of his life but his death and resurrection. Tillich’s correlation theology seeks to revise liberalism so as to grant both revelation and contextual relevance their due, but he ended up with a similar radical revisionism of scriptural revelation in order to be relevant to his contemporary context. Liberation theology represented a secular turn to the world so as to bring theology into service to the mercy and justice of the kingdom of God in society. Though the gospel is relevant to social justice, social salvation is to be realized first in the church. Yet, the church denies its own witness if it does not in its witness to Christ raise a voice against social injustice. Contextual theologies have focused on the relevance of the biblical message to cultures outside of the West and the issues that they raise. Lastly, postliberalism represents a turn back to the church from the conviction that there is no general experience of God in the world to which the church must seek to be relevant. The church’s communicative practices represent the means of interpreting scripture. Though postliberalism is correct to grant scripture the formative role in our experience of God, it needs to include an emphasis on the corrective function of scripture over against the church’s witness. And it is still possible within this emphasis on scripture and the church’s witness as exercising the chief role in giving rise to experience of God to allow for an experience of God to also exist in the world that is in need of the church’s guidance. Cultural context is still important as having a secondary influence on the church’s interpretation of the gospel.

Scripture is indeed the privileged voice of the Spirit in the churches. Scripture is inspired by God (God-breathed) so as to be the privileged voice of the Spirit (witness to Christ) in the church. Scripture is not the only voice of the Spirit in the church. The Spirit uses testimony, prophesy, confession, worship, and various other means of communication, not all of which is verbal. Preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper are the communicative actions that Christ has instituted to bring the church together around his presence in a definitive way to celebrate the gift of Christ and commit to following him again and again. Yet, in the midst of all of the communicative means, the scripture is the privileged voice of the Spirit in the church; it is the medium of the Spirit that functions as the supreme standard, the only final court of appeal in theological discussion and debate. Such is the meaning of sola scriptura (scripture alone). Scripture is reliable in its witness to Christ. Christ is indeed its chief subject matter, its inner standard of meaning (the canon within the canon). In its faithful and authoritative witness to Christ, scripture is the canon or standard of the church. The Spirit not only inspired the writing of scripture but also its canonization process. The Spirit continues to speak through the scriptures so as to conform the church to Christ. Not only understanding the scripture but also obeying and embodying its message is the goal. Christian leadership has this encouraging embodiment as its calling. Since the meaning of scripture will only be fully revealed when Christ accomplishes all to which the scripture bears witness in the new creation (Matt. 5:17-18), no individual, no church grasps it all. We need the many tongues and insights of the global church and even then the Bible’s full meaning is still not fully in reach. But we are on a path of discovery that represents the grandest adventure of all, one that gives all in self-crucifixion so as to receive all in the risen life. If only we will have the courage to yield and commit to it.

Chapter 1 Questions:

1) What does the term “theology literally mean? Discuss the issue of theology as an academic field of study.

3) Distinguish systematic theology from biblical studies (and exegesis)

4) Distinguish systematic theology from church history (and historical theology).

5) Distinguish systematic theology from practical theology.

6) Discuss the verbal plenary inspiration of scripture in relation to 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:19.

7) Relate the scriptures to the revelation of Christ according to Matthew 5:17-18; John 1:14, 18; Hebrews 1:1-3, and 2 Peter 1:19.

Ch. 2:

God

The diverse tongues of Pentecost declared the wonders of God. The wonders of *God*! God is the chief and all-encompassing point of reference. All of the loci of theology are God based, God intoxicated, God directed. The overarching declaration refers above all else to the divine perfection and glory. Saying that *God exists* cannot be a neutral or abstract idea but is always a gospel of redemption and a call to discipleship. Knowing and loving God makes life purposeful and worthwhile. This faith confession is essential to the human quest and testimonials to its truth abound. Still, the emphasis of theology among the many tongues of Pentecost are not preoccupied with the rewards of faith but rather with doxology or worship. Theology begins and ends with the *wonders of God*.

If Pentecost teaches us anything, it teaches us that the words, “God exists,” calls us way beyond what our minds and tongues can grasp. The ecstasy of divine love revealed in the outpouring of the Spirit makes faith ecstatic, causing us to rise above our limitations to reach for something transcendent, global, and ultimate. So, one must exercise care in saying “God exists,” since human nature is so prone to idolatry. When we say “God exists” we are prone to think of God as one “existing being” among others, just a larger and more powerful version of ourselves. But this understanding of God is anthropomorphic (stated in human terms and concepts), as are all thoughts and statements about God, but authentic thoughts and statements are aware of this limitation and seek to be careful to respect God’s *transcendence*. God is personal. We can pray to God and God answers. God shows loves and shows mercy. Even though God is personal, God is not personal in exactly the same way that we are. God is the source of all personhood; we aren’t. God is personal not only as the existent One but as the One who is the ground and ongoing possibility of the existence of all else. God’s existence is not dependent on anything else to be. We are dependent. Acts 17:28 notes that all of the various peoples of the world “live, move, and *have their being*” in God.

Interestingly, the exact wording of Hebrews 11:6b concerning faith in God is “anyone who comes to him must believe that *he* *is* and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” The phrase, *God is,* is perhaps the preferred way of saying God *exists*, though the latter way of saying this is acceptable as long as the theologian bears the above-stated qualifications in mind! Moreover, saying that seeking and knowing God makes life purposeful and rewarding (“he rewards those who earnestly seek him”) must also be declared with caution, since we can all too easily define the divine purpose according to our own self-serving wish list. This is why the gospel of Christ and the totality of the scriptural witness surrounding it must remain the criterion for how we define the divine purpose and fulfillment.

*God and Creation:*

The conviction that God exists causes us to view *nature* as *creation*. Nature does not contain within itself an adequate explanation for its existence. Nature is thus to be viewed as created. All things have their origin in God. Hebrews 1:3 notes: “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” Genesis 1:3 has God speaking into the emptiness and darkness of the deep “let there be light.” In the mighty storm of the Spirit, God brings light in the midst of the darkness, order from chaos, and beautiful form from emptiness (Gen. 1:1-3). Genesis starts with creation already in progress. The voidness and formlessness do not lack substance but rather order and purpose.[[23]](#footnote-23) God does not command the light into existence as a tyrant does, *light appear*! Rather, God says “*let* there be light.” God creates the light and immediately enables its flourishing in a way that allows it to participate in the divine purpose. God is the God of the possible, granting all that exists its being but in a way that immediately invites its own participation in the creative process.

Hebrews 11:3 implies an *absolute beginning* to all things by pointing to the origin of all things by the command of God *alone*, and not from things that already exist: “what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” Romans 4:17b is more to the point by referring to Abraham’s faith this way: “He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.” Notice that God brings into being “things that were *not*.” God creates out of *nothing*, in Latin, *ex nihilo*. And this miracle of creation is connected to the grand miracle of raising the dead. All of creation is called into being miraculously *out of nothing* by the Word and Spirit of God, which points to the fact that God will call the new creation forth by that same Word and Spirit from the clutches of death unto life. And that new creation will be the final vindication of the truth of faith in God as Creator. God as Redeemer assumes God as Creator and vice versa.

Creation out of nothing means *absolute nothing*, which is impossible to imagine. If one tries to imagine it, included in the mental image will be something like light or empty space. But physicists inform us that even light or empty space is *something*. It’s not nothing in the absolute sense of the term. So, saying that God creates from absolute nothing is an unimaginable confession of faith. But it is a confession that makes sense in another way. If there were not an absolute beginning to all things, nature would extend infinitely into the past. But that idea is arguably absurd, since all things are caused by something else. If nature lacked an absolute beginning, there would be a series of causes extending infinitely into the past. But then that would mean that it would take an infinity to reach the present state of affairs! This would be so, even if infinity were a frozen block rather than a flowing stream of events, for even a block requires a sequence of some sort if the reality of which we speak is nature.[[24]](#footnote-24) Let’s imagine infinite time as a hotel with an infinite number of rooms, each one occupied by a different phase of natural history. But that perspective does not omit the fact that nature still moves from phase to phase (room to room) to be that that nature at that phase. One cannot deny that there is such a thing as an arrow of time, a sequence of sorts, that moves only in one direction, *forwards*. One can anticipate and experience the rising sun of the next day but cannot anticipate and experience the dawn of the previous day. Within this “block” version of time, an infinite sequence of *any* sort would make reaching the present state of affairs impossible, since it would take moving through an infinite number of “rooms” to get to the one of which we are currently aware. Even if an infinity of “rooms” into the past were possible in mathematical reasoning, that doesn’t mean it would make sense in actual physical reality. Thus, there must be a “first cause” of all things, a first cause that is *uncaused*. Creation would then be *finite* into that past. Now, that makes sense. The above discussion is an argument for God’s existence based on *causality*.

In making this argument from causality, we must note that God is not a cause like any other cause. Saying that God is a “first cause” means that God is the *uncaused cause*. That makes God unique. Being an uncaused cause means that in God and in God *alone* are the conditions necessary for existence and that these conditions and the existence that they explain are *essential* to God. Because we are contingent, dependent on conditions other than ourselves to exist, it is possible for us *not* to exist. For example, my parents were necessary to my existence. If they had never met, I would not have existed. This means that it is possible that I might not have existed. But God is not contingent. God is not dependent on anything beyond God to exist. Thus, there is no possible way, no possible lack or barrier, that would prevent God from existing. God does not just *happen* to exist; God *must* exist, because it is God’s very essence to exist, meaning that God has within Godself all that is necessary to exist as God. *God’s infinite perfection means that the conditions necessary for God to exist could not have possibly been absent*. For God *not* to exist is a theological absurdity. *This is the argument from contingence*.

The above argument from God’s perfection is also called the *ontological argument* for God’s existence. It was advocated in the eleventh century by Anselm. Anselm noted that God is the greatest thought imaginable (that than which nothing greater can be thought), meaning that God is perfect in every way, lacks nothing, including existence.[[25]](#footnote-25) Nature is different. According to this argument, even if nature *had* existed eternally into the past, it may still be said that it just *happened* to have existed eternally! If the conditions for such eternal existence had been lacking, nature would not have existed. This means that the thought that we have of an infinitely perfect being that is not contingent in any way must correspond to reality, or must be ontological rather than merely notional (or an idea that might or might not exist). The inherent reach of the soul for transcendence is by its very definition existent.

God’s creating everything “out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*) means that creation does not emanate out of God’s essence in a way that shares that essence, as pantheists assume. The term *pantheism* literally means “everything is divine” (*pan* means “everything” and *theism* refers to “God”). To assume that the cosmos and humans share the divine nature, is to deify nature or to treat it as if it warranted the reverence and adoration that belongs to God alone. Pantheism also tends to strip God of personhood, which is why meditation rather than prayer tends to be the preferred response to the divine mystery in pantheism. Pantheists are in awe of the universe but they tend not to ask God for mercy nor seek answers to prayer. Lastly, a pantheistic universe assumes a unity between human nature and the divine nature. The human soul is considered by nature divine. There is thus no need for atonement or reconciliation with God. Sin is often viewed as essentially a lack of consciousness of God, meaning, of our true selves in continuity with God. In light of all of these theological missteps, it is important to reject the notion of emanation and to affirm instead creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). God creates by the power of the divine Word and the Holy Spirit *alone*.

The creation of the world is re-stated in John 1:1-5 placing Christ in the place of the “Word.” This Christological focus means that the divine *fiat* (speaking) “let there be…” that brought the creation into being in the power of the Spirit was spoken by and even in *Christ*. Christ mediated creation from the heavenly Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit. All things were created *through* and *for* Christ (“all things have been created through him and for him,” Col. 1:16b). Not only is Christ eternally God’s gift to creation; creation was eternally chosen by God to be a gift to Christ! Creation was made as a tabernacle in which God would dwell and in which humanity would dwell in God’s image. “He stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in” (Isa. 40:22). But this creation was also to be analogous to a kingdom in which the God-Man, Jesus Christ, would reign. Creation was thus meant to be Christ’s dwelling place, Christ’s kingdom in the presence of the Spirit. The Spirit in creating all things did so to bring into being a creation that is obedient to the command that is represented and expressed in the divine Son of the Father. The Son mediates the Spirit at creation to sanctify it as the receptive vessel of the divine indwelling that will be shaped in Christ’s glorious image one day. The Spirit was to make creation into a mirror of Christ’s glory directed to the heavenly Father; indeed, all things were made to eventually be offered up by Christ in glory to the Father. “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24).

The new creation in the sanctity of the Spirit fulfills the old creation that fell under the curse of sin and death. The glory offered to God in the old creation (Ps. 19:1-4) is dimmed by the curse of chaos, decay, and death. God’s glory will shine with unfathomable purity, beauty, and strength in the new creation ruled by Christ and sanctified and glorified by the Spirit. “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev. 21:22-23). God pervades creation even now to sustain and renew it in the natural sphere. The Spirit works in the natural realm in talented human endeavors, in social justice, and to alleviate suffering. But such flourishing is limited by the curse of evil, decay, and death. Christ conquered this curse, broke through those barriers in his death and resurrection: “you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay” (Acts 2:17). Creation can now be sanctified and glorified supernaturally through Christ and in the Spirit that is poured forth through his redeeming work. That which is mortal will be “swallowed up” in God’s immortal life (2 Cor. 5:4). The mercy, righteousness, and justice of the kingdom of God will reign on earth as it does in heaven (Matt. 6:9-10). We are now to seek signs of the kingdom in the life of the church and, beyond this, analogous signs in the world.

*The Problem of Suffering:*

The text from Hebrews 11 quoted above deserves another look: “anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him’ (v. 6b). Faith in God is not an abstract idea. It is forged in the context of real-life challenges, especially those that give rise to human suffering. Suffering is often the occasion in which faith in God arises. However, that very same suffering that occasions the rise of faith can also give rise to questioning God’s existence. Faith requires courage in the face of doubt and we can trust in God to renew and sustain our faith. Paul wrote that we are “perplexed but not in despair” (2 Cor. 4:8b). According to the text quoted from Hebrews, faith involves the conviction that God rewards those who seek. In other words, the person who seeks after God in faith is driven by the conviction that faith will be vindicated as worthwhile; it will bring the reward that it promises. The evil and suffering of this age will not gain the upper hand nor have the final word. Despite the great suffering and loss, God makes it all worthwhile. The glory that will one day define creation will so overwhelm the former suffering in both depth and extent that the suffering will not be worth mentioning. Paul puts the matter this way: **“**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

The entire passage of Romans 8:18-21 is worth quoting:

**18**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. **19**For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. **20**For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21**that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Paul’s topic here is the resurrection of the saints in glory. He calls it a great “revelation” of the children of God. The audience of this event is all of creation which implicitly waits “in eager expectation” of the glorification of the new humanity. The terms “eager expectation” imply that creation is straining to see it, desperately wanting it, needing it. Why? The reason Paul gives is that creation was “subjected to frustration” along with humanity, not by its own choice but because of what humanity had done and what God did in response. What is frustrated is life, frustrated because it needs life but cannot attain it as God intended it, life abundant, life immortal, life in the full liberty and sanctity of the Spirit. But God subjected creation along with humanity to this frustration “in hope!” In other words, judgment had redemption as its goal. When humanity failed God, God could have destroyed it all, even more thoroughly than was the case during the flood in the time of Noah. God could have brought an end to it all. But what God did instead was subject humanity and all of creation to a path of suffering “in hope” or with redemption as its intended conclusion. The intended conclusion is that all of creation “will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.” Those who believe will indeed hold that God exists and that a life seeking God will be rewarded or vindicated as worthwhile. Since *theodicy* is the challenge of justifying faith in God in the context of suffering, there can be no theodicy that does not have at its core this conviction that the coming glory will make life with God worthwhile despite the suffering that one may endure.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The very fact that God would bring humanity towards redemption on a path of suffering does not mean that they are expected to work their way there by their own resources. God joins them on that path, bearing up under their pain. “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering” (Isa. 53:4). In doing so, God makes their journey possible, opening a path to redemption that would not otherwise be possible. God did not watch us suffer from a distance but rather took up our problem and carried us on the path to redemption and to the renewal of life. God calls us to a path of faith and repentance and enables our participation in the divine life. Yet, God does not repent and believe for us. Our path to redemption involves us entirely. The solution to the problem of suffering for humanity involved the history of trial and redemption because God wants humanity’s involvement in the defeat of evil, the overcoming of suffering, and the victory of redemption. Just imagine how far and wide the gospel of salvation would go if the entirety of the church were involved in communicating it with their very lives. Imagine what would happen to social injustice, poverty, and disease, if humanity were to place their defeat at the very top of their priorities. Many ask what God is doing about such things. The cross, the resurrection, and the divine presence by the Spirit is the answer. However, what *we* are doing must be asked as well.

I have no intention of trivializing the problem of evil and suffering. All of creation suffers greatly. Humanity shares in this suffering too. The most difficult to understand and to bear is the suffering of children. Why does God allow it? That humanity can fall into such depths of evil is not hard to understand. God did not create automatons that are pre-programmed to always obey. God created persons who can choose otherwise. Their evil choice affects a broader circle of people, especially as corporate groups institutionalize the evil such as racism. Augustine noted that humanity was made for God. But humanity was also made *from nothing*. God spoke light and order from the emptiness and the chaos. Made for God, humanity implicitly reaches for God, made from nothing, humanity is threatened by the emptiness and the chaos into which they could descend by parting from God. Augustine wrote of humanity, “that it is a nature, this is because it is made by God; but that it falls away from Him, this is because it is made out of nothing.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The Eastern tradition adds to this point that humanity was not made as perfect but rather as innocent. Perfection would come with human involvement. Humans were made in the divine image and after the divine likeness as an ongoing process. The *image* was considered natural propensities for God like procreation and the care of creation (Gen. 1:27-28). But the *likeness* is a supernatural destiny of regeneration, sanctification, and immortality in Christ. The human journey to immortality by the grace of God was tragically interrupted by the human fall requiring redemption (the cross and the resurrection) as the bridge. Following this tradition, John Hick writes, “And so man, created as a personal being in the *image* of God, is only the raw material for a further and more difficult stage of God's creative work” which is the *likeness* of God revealed in Jesus Christ and taken on through the work of the Spirit.[[28]](#footnote-28) So, for Hick, humanity is in the process of “soul making” on this path of suffering from emptiness and chaos to beauty and fulfillment.[[29]](#footnote-29) The cross and the resurrection mediates the journey from natural image to supernatural (immortal) likeness.

What about those cases of suffering that baffle the mind because they are so terrible? We should seek to do what we can to protest and change such terror. But the question remains, why did God allow it? Such questions often bring us to the outer limits of theological knowledge. The book of Job addresses this issue. When God points out to satan how faithful Job is, satan plays the role of the quintessential cynic. He points out that Job is only faithful because God protects him from all harm and cares for all of his needs. He states his protest: “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” (1:10-11). God has protected Job from all of the tragedies of life that normally affect others. Why *wouldn’t* he be faithful? He knows it’s in his interest to obey! Satan implies that God is deluded in thinking that Job’s faith is genuine. God is being used and faith is a joke. One hears this criticism today too. Religion is a farce; it is used by those who are only interested in what they can get out of it, and the rest are fools.

So, God allows satan to remove the protective hedge and expose Job and his family to the full brunt of life in this cursed world filled with suffering. Satan strikes a blow to every area of Job’s happiness. His herds, wealth, and servants are ravaged by outside invaders. A tornado strikes the home where his children are feasting causing it to crash down upon them. Chapter 1 ends with a testimonial to Job’s continued faithfulness in spite of unbelievable sorrow that has overtaken him. At this point, satan’s argument is losing credibility. His back is against the wall. He has one card left to play. It seems, satan supposes, that Job is *so* self-centered that *all* he really cares about is his own skin. “‘Skin for skin!’ Satan replied. ‘A man will give all he has for his own life’” (2:4). So, satan gains permission from God to strike Job with a dreadful disease, but even then, Job remains faithful. “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (2:10b). At that point, satan has run out of arguments. Job has vindicated the possibility of genuine faith and has shown what it looks like under fire. This was his mission.

But Job did not know this. He knew nothing of the entire background of the trial to which we as the readers were made privy. After satan exits the drama, Job’s comforters enter. A lengthy discussion ensues in which Job defends his innocence. Contrary to his comforter’s views, Job argues that he did not deserve this trial. Job says of God, “If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments” (23:3-4). Job wrestles with God, but he does not denounce his faith. This becomes another purpose to Job’s life. As Gustavo Gutierrez points out, he illustrates the language of protest that is possible even before God when faced with the possible horrors of life.[[30]](#footnote-30)

At the end, God appears before Job in a storm. God basically reminds Job that there is much he does not know, a higher purpose of which he is not aware. Job sees the light:

Then Job replied to the Lord:

“I know that you can do all things;  
    no purpose of yours can be thwarted.  
You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’  
    Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
    things too wonderful for me to know” (42:1-3).

What is interesting about this statement is that God has a redemptive purpose that will be fulfilled in the midst of every hardship, sometimes much more *in spite of* than because of it. And, best of all, this purpose cannot be thwarted, the hardship cannot be the all-defining reality. Secondly, Job confesses that he does not know what this purpose is. “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand things too wonderful for me to know.” Even after meeting God, Job *still* does not know, *but he trusts God*. He does not know what purpose could ever make his life worthwhile in spite of it all. His purpose of showing that genuine faithfulness is possible, what it looks like under fire, and how one can respond to God as a result would be fulfilled by Christ hanging on a cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark. 15:34). And as for Christ’s resurrection, this is indeed the ultimate purpose that nothing can thwart and that makes life worthwhile despite the suffering. Job seems to have caught a glimpse of it:

I know that my redeemerlives,  
    and that in the end he will stand on the earth.   
And after my skin has been destroyed,  
    yetin my flesh I will see God;  
I myself will see him  
    with my own eyes—I, and not another.  
    How my heart yearns within me! (19:25-27).

Job’s hardship cannot thwart this purpose, dim its glory, and destroy its place of supremacy over the meaning of his life, over the meaning of history. The reason is that we were made for God’s glory. Despite unimaginably grievous suffering, *life in God provse to be worthwhile after all*. The glory of resurrection fulfills us so deeply and so fully that not even tragedy on the scale of Job’s can nullify it. Not even suffering on that scale can cut deeper or reach farther when it comes to the meaning of life. As Paul said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). Paul did not write this from an ivory tower. Just read 2 Corinthians 11!

*Divine Perfections:*

Divine attributes (characteristics that are considered divine) may best be called “perfections.” God is infinitely perfect. Such perfection is unimaginable to us. Essential to God is divine love; God is infinitely perfect love. 1 John 4:7-10 is key to this insight:

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Notice how the text assumes that “like knows like.” The more we become *like* God by participating in divine love the more we *know* God, since God *is* love. Then the text focuses on the cross as the major place where God reveals divine love. How significant is this that God would define Godself at a cross, at the deepest pit of human despair and condemnation. God has chosen to meet us precisely there, where we need God the most. Pointing to the cross, the text says, “this is love” and then follows with “not that we love God but that he loved us.” This cross is where it all begins for the Christian, not where *we* reach for God but where *God* reaches for us! Of course, we by God’s grace must reach back, but all things begin and are sustained by God’s prior movement. God’s grace always takes the first and all defining step! The love that binds God to us and enables us to respond does not arise from us! We do not define it! We do not initiate it! We do not account for its ongoing and all-sustaining power. This love comes from God, *is God*! In this light, Romans 5:5 is also significant: “And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” The love of God that is revealed and that conquers at the cross and in the resurrection is poured forth through Jesus Christ at Pentecost! The Spirit fills our lives and transforms us at the moment we become a Christian by faith in the gospel. This love is the path to knowing God. One who does not love does *not* know God. We should let that thought sink in.

The classical view of God that informed theology in the modern era tended to contrast creaturely and divine attributes. To be creaturely is to be finite, limited, subject to change, corrupt, suffering, and dying. To be divine is to be infinite, unlimited, unchanging (immutable), unaffected by evil, impassible (invulnerable to suffering), and eternal. Though such *contrasts* do exist (with needed qualifications), stressing them could eclipse the *relationality* of God with creation and engaging involvement of God in creation, especially through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The key is to qualify the above-mentioned contrasts by what is actually revealed of God in the Christ event in the context of the entirety of the biblical narrative. Though no easy connections should be made between the God revealed and active in history and God’s life in Godself throughout eternity, a correspondence certainly does exist. Otherwise, the God revealed in history would not authentically be *God*.

When exploring the divine perfections, it helps to be reminded that we speak here centrally of the perfection of divine love. Arguably, love cannot be perfect unless it is both free and totally engaged in and for the one who is loved. God is indeed both, free and totally involved in our reality. The divine freedom is not only apart from us (meaning not dependent on us) but also *for us*. But divine love is indeed still not dependent on us. God does not need humanity to be God. As Paul preached in Athens concerning our gracious God, “And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:25). But God does love and long for humanity. The question obviously arises, can God suffer? This has been a difficult question to answer in the history of theology. The God of scripture is presented as passionate. Though anthropomorphic, this perfection shows how intensely God longs for us. To say that God does not need us to be fully God does not mean that God has no desire for us. For example, Genesis 6:6 notes that God’s “heart was deeply troubled” when observing how much sin there was in the world at the time of Noah. Moreover, God “so loves the world” “that he gave his one and only Son” in the power of the Spirit to save us (John 3:16). The divine Son took on flesh and went to a cross to bear our suffering, condemnation, and death so that we may know life everlasting. Surely, God can be said to have borne suffering for us. The problem here is that suffering implies a need or a lack; the one who suffers needs relief or a desired fulfillment. But God is infinitely perfect and has no need of anything. For this reason, the church in the early centuries regarded God as *impassible* (essentially invulnerable to suffering). But how can a God who is impassible suffer?

Perhaps it would help if we were to say that God can suffer in bearing *our* suffering but without suffering having an adverse effect on the divine essence or life. There can be no need or lack in God. God “suffers” without being adversely affected within God’s perfect fullness of life, meaning that God does not suffer the way that we do, or in a way that involves any lack or that forces God to reach for personal fulfillment. And, yet, God *still* suffers! The prominent theologians of the first several centuries of Christian history (church fathers) maintained that God “suffers impassibly” or in a way that does not involve any lack in God’s perfection. God’s perfection is revealed precisely in loving freely and fully. Indeed, if God cannot give in a way that enters unimaginably fully into the suffering of others, would that not in itself reveal a lack in God? So, not lacking anything, God does indeed reveal the fullness and perfection of divine love by entering fully into our suffering and need so as to bear it for us to redeem and heal us. But we should still maintain that God loves in a way that does not reveal a lack of divine perfection, a loss of divine fullness; his bearing our suffering fully is part of his fullness! But God suffers no lack in bearing our suffering. God does not lose any divine perfection. As Karl Barth wrote, “God gives Himself but he does not give Himself away.”[[31]](#footnote-31) God is perfect love but out of grace God overflows onto others to bring them into that fulfillment so that they may be blessed by it. God bears their suffering without being essentially and adversely changed by it, for God is *immutable* (cannot change essentially). God has freely determined from all eternity to be the God who loves others fully and unconditionally, so much so, that God takes on their burdens so that they could be free.

I say this knowing full well that there are modern theologians like Kazoh Kitamori and Jürgen Moltmann, who go so far as to reject divine impassibility. In their view, God so longs for humanity as to experience suffering at the very core of God’s being. God’s very wholeness or self-reconciliation is dependent on the history of salvation. Writing from post-War Japan, Kitamori maintained that God responds to a sinful and suffering world by being deeply divided or in conflict. God’s justice requires wrath for sinners but God’s love requires embracing them. God is in conflict! God resolves the conflict in favor of love. At the cross especially, God overcomes wrath to extend love and grace to sinners. In providing for reconciliation with sinners, God reconciles with Godself. In taking on our suffering and overcoming it, God’s own turmoil is resolved.[[32]](#footnote-32) In a similar vein, Moltmann maintains that by committing the Son to human flesh, the Father longs for the Son in longing for humanity. Reconciling with humanity involves the reconciliation of the Father and the Son in the Spirit.[[33]](#footnote-33)

I respond to this rejection of divine impassibility with both gratitude and hesitance. There is no question but that creation *matters* to God and that God desires it, wills grace rather than wrath for it. As Daniel Castelo has shown, God’s impassibility does not mean divine *apathy*. It just means that God does not lose any divine perfection and fullness in desiring humanity and bearing their suffering. That fact helps to explain how God’s love conquers wrath and suffering to save us.[[34]](#footnote-34) But I regard Kitamori and Moltmann as going too far in rejecting the classical doctrine of divine impassibility. I agree with Kitamori that God overcomes wrath to reach out to humanity in grace. I am grateful to him for rhetorically driving this point home to me. Yet, this overcoming love cannot literally involve an inner conflict in God that requires resolution. God does not require inner wholeness by loving others. God is perfect love and loves others in the abundant overflow of that love. Likewise, I agree with Moltmann that the incarnation binds God to humanity in eternal covenant relation. Due to the incarnation, God will never be known as God again without us. Jesus will forever be the God-Man. This is a covenant marriage without the possibility of divorce! How God loves us! I am grateful to Moltmann for rhetorically driving home the unfathomable depth of divine love and longing for humanity. Yet, again, God is not in need of reconciliation with humanity in order to be self-reconciled. There is no need or lack in God. What would help is for us to distinguish between God’s eternal inner communion as Father, Son, and Spirit (the immanent Trinity) and God’s involvement in history to save us as an overflow of divine perfection and love (the economic Trinity). Though there is only one Trinity, there are these two distinct dimensions. The former (God as God is in God’s inner being) does not require the latter (God’s self-giving in history) for fulfillment. Rather, the latter is the overflow of the former. So, God suffers but not as we do. God bears our suffering without ceasing to be fully and perfectly God. In fact, God’s perfection is revealed in this overflow of gracious love to the sinners, thus entering with unimaginable depth into our suffering to save us. God loses no power in taking on our weakness. Otherwise, our hope would rest on a limited foundation.

To explain God’s wrath, one needs to take God’s infinite purity into consideration. God’s love is holy love, love that is infinitely pure, not vulnerable to evil or seduction, not tainted by darkness and corruption. God is infinitely powerful and invulnerable purity. For this reason, evil cannot conquer God, cannot be the final word of history. God in infinite holiness is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). Holy love conquers all. This means that God rejects evil so intensely because God loves us so intensely and knows what evil does to us. All of this means that divine wrath is not simply anger, though God rejects evil and is displeased with the path we have chosen in our flight from God. Theologically, wrath is an objective state, alienation from divine love. Equating divine wrath simply with anger is reductionistic and leads to distortions in our image of God. Wrath is ultimately alienation from divine love, which God overcomes on the cross. It is impossible to understand wrath apart from the cross.

More to the point theologically, God’s wrath consists of God’s handing us over to the destructive alienation of sin and death that we have chosen for ourselves. Note Isaiah 53:4-6:

Surely he took up our pain  
    and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
    stricken by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
    he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
    and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
    each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
    the iniquity of us all.

Notice that God’s Messiah, the Suffering Servant, is said to “take up” our pain and suffering by having the punishment of our iniquity laid upon him. Looking at this event in the light of the cross, Christ was no victim that was involved in events that had spun out of his control. He freely *took up* our suffering to save us. We considered *him* stricken by God but it was *our* suffering that he took on and not that which *he* deserved. He suffered vicariously or in our place. His taking on our suffering and judgment resulted in our healing. But notice especially the nature of our sin that is the source of our judgment, our sorrow and despair: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way.” This is the “iniquity” that was laid on him. The sin is our straying from God and the judgment is the condemnation and death that we endure in alienation from God and to which God hands us over in our fleeing from God (Rom. 1:24-28). God also handed over the divine Son to a cross so that we can be justified in his rising from the dead (4:25). “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). Christ as God’s Son was predestined to be condemned in our place so that we may all share in his predestination to glory. Divine love and holiness are thus not different perfections that can be played off against each other or placed in tension with one another.

The idea of divine *simplicity* assumes that God’s perfections are one. God perfections cannot be dissected into separate parts. God’s perfection is “simple” in the sense that it is indivisibly one. God’s perfections cannot be separated from each other but are rather mutually defining aspects of divine love. For example, God’s faithfulness means that God’s love is faithful. God’s love is faithful and true, the faithful love of God that is the Rock of our salvation. “If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). God is the great “I Am Who I Am,” which can be translated to say that God *always* “is what God is” unchangeably faithful (Exod. 3:14). God is the one who will make good on the divine promises that God made with “uplifted hand” as if swearing an oath (6:6-8). The author of Hebrews elaborates that “since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself” (6:13). God swore to Godself to always be faithful and true! So also Christ is the “same yesterday, today, and forever” (13:8). God’s faithfulness “continues through all generations” (Ps. 119:90) for it has no expiration date; it’s who God *is*, faithful and true, for God’s “compassions never fail” (Lam. 3:23). God’s faithfulness changes us into its image. Faith in God endures as well, being sustained by divine faithfulness: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23). Indeed, “For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness” (Ps. 26:3). God’s “changing God’s mind” in scripture never has God betraying a divine promise or contradicting the divine nature or purpose. The perceived change in course is caused by God’s enduring faithfulness in changing circumstances to the divine purposes.

God is not limited by anything external to God. God is *omnipotent* or all-powerful love, for “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). God’s limitless power is not naked or raw power but is rather the power of divine love. Our hope is based on this very point, at the end of history all will learn that divine love wins. Nothing can separate us from that love. “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). God’s limitless power liberates and empowers towards the fulfillment of the good; it does not oppress. It is not tyrannical. Thus, divine omnipotence does not mean that God can do just *anything*. There are things that God cannot do because they are outside of the divine nature and will. For example, “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). God cannot sin. God cannot engage in foolish tasks. This popular riddle is a good example: “Can God make a rock too heavy for God to lift?” The answer is obviously, *no*. God cannot contradict Godself or even attempt such a senseless act. Omnipotence means rather that God can do whatever is within God’s nature and will to do in service to divine love. The cross highlights the nature of divine love and the resurrection and its fulfillment in the future kingdom of God reveals its omnipotence.

God as loving is also all knowing or *omniscient*. “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please’” (Isa. 46:10). All that God pleases to do is known by God in all of eternity. As with God’s other perfections, God’s omniscience serves the purposes of divine love, is a property of this love. God is not an all-seeing eye that has any hint of evil or oppression as its purpose. The Psalmist writes in his effort to flee from God “surely the darkness will hide me” but then quickly adds, “even the darkness will not be dark to you” (Ps. 139:11-12). God sees and knows all, and we can thank God that this is so. Given our idolatrous ways, if we could hide something from God, the temptation to do so would at times seem irresistible. But God will not allow us to rest comfortably in our effort to hide behind our sin and self-justification. “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13). I am deeply grateful that God knows all.

But does God’s limitless knowledge imply that humans do not have any free will? Does the fact that God knows all that will happen in human history mean that history is determined by God down to the minutest detail? There are theologians called “open theists” (or “free will theists”) who hold that God’s omniscience does indeed eliminate human free will. All of history ends up a script written in advance that God knows from beginning to end. Nothing can happen outside of that which is known by God. To avoid determinism and the elimination of human freedom, open theists reject divine omniscience. There are open theists who would say that God knows all *possibilities* of what could happen as well as the major salvation historical events that are vital to the victory of divine love in history, such as fulfilled prophecy. But God chose not to know history in every detail so as to grant space for history to be “open” to unforeseen and divinely graced human accomplishments.[[35]](#footnote-35) Biblical statements that reveal God “regretting” a former action in the light of new developments (Gen. 6:7), changing the divine intention (2 Kings 20:1-6), or showing surprise at an event (Jer. 7:31) indicate that God does not know exactly which among the numerous possibilities will actually occur in many instances.

The major problem with this view of God is that it allows human history to limit God. If God moves through time discovering things along with the rest of us, God is limited by time. How far can this limitation hem God in? History can be a powerful force. Many fear that in open theism the rock upon which our hope is built would end up frighteningly weak. God would arguably resemble a finite god more than the Lord of history who declares the end from the beginning. Moreover, the idea that omniscience eliminates human free will can indeed be challenged. Knowledge is not the same as determination. God can be said to know something because it happens rather than saying that it happens because God knows it. This is not to say that God is not Lord of history and at work guiding and influencing. God’s involvement in human history can leave space for human input distinct from the fact that God knows all things. Moreover, statements in the Bible that show God regretting, changing course, or showing surprise are anthropomorphic and have other points to make besides the issue of God’s knowledge. For example, God’s showing shock at Israel’s behavior is rhetorically meant to be a commentary on the magnitude of Israel’s disobedience in that moment rather than the nature or extent of divine knowledge.

God is also all present or *omnipresent*. The psalmist asks God, “where can I flee from your presence?” (Ps 139:7). The answer is obvious, nowhere! Divine simplicity compels us thus to say that there are no boundaries to the presence of our loving God or to the reach of divine love. God is not bounded, rather, God bounds all else. God in essence has no bodily form, nor is God spatially limited, for “God is Spirit” or is incorporeal (John 4:24). The heaven, even the highest heaven, cannot contain God (2 Chron. 2:6). Old Testament stories of God appearing in human form (such as walking in the Garden and calling for Adam and Eve, Gen. 3:8-9) may be termed “theophanies” of God or visible appearances on the order of a momentary manifestation of a boundless God. A theophany is a visible manifestation of the transcendent, incorporeal God. Theophanies foreshadow the incarnation of the Word (or Son) of the Father in flesh but they are still not an incarnation, only a manifestation, which reserves the incarnation as a once and for all time unique event: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). This Word always revealed the Father who was never seen: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God andis in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). That the Word or Son reveals the Father who was never seen implies that Old Testament theophanies of God may perhaps best be termed “Christophanies” (pre-incarnate manifestations of the Son of God) since Christ was always (from before the beginning of all things) the Word or revelation of the Father (John 1:1). An example is Isaiah’s beholding a theophany of the Lord in the Temple in Isaiah 6, which John tells us was a Christophany: “he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him” (John 12:41).

As omnipresent, God not only acts in creation; creation exists in God. Not only does God act in time; time exists in God. No matter how the psalmist might try to flee God, he confronted God at every turn.

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
    Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
    if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
    if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
    your right hand will hold me fast (Ps. 139:7-10).

No matter where the psalmist might go, he never ceases to say to God, “You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me” (Ps. 139:5). How can we evade God? “Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” declares the Lord (Jer. 23:24). Nor can any place of worship contain the infinitely transcendent God. “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). God is all present but not always in the same way, but always in a way consistent with divine love. In evil situations, God is the power of resistance; in resistance to grace, convicting and patient, in praise, inviting. When worship leaders invite God’s presence, they are actually inviting a mode of presence appropriate to that setting.

*The Triune God:*

God is One, the one incomparable God who loves in freedom. God’s oneness is God absolute uniqueness, for God *alone* is God. “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” Isa. 40:25). As Katherine Sonderegger notes, “Radical Oneness, radical uniqueness, demands thought beyond any class, any universal, any likeness.”[[36]](#footnote-36) God’s oneness also demands undivided loyalty. The great “shema” (a declaration to “hear”) of Israel makes this point clear: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5). In this text, God’s oneness means that God alone is God and is worthy of absolute loyalty. There is no pantheon of gods from which someone can choose one over against the others; neither can we divide our loyalty among more than one. If deity is shared among separate deities, no single one would be infinite or omnipotent, since they would border and limit one another. Idols are indeed finite but not the one and only incomparable God. We were made for God, so that giving loyalty to anything but God causes us to slip into bondage and a distorted version of ourselves. Only faith in God frees and fulfills us.

In the light of the New Testament, it seems clear that the one God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Every step in the story of Jesus presents the accomplishment of salvation as a shared action of three. The Holy Spirit of “the Most High” overshadows Mary so that she will conceive in her womb the holy Son of God (Luke 1:35). At Christ’s baptism, the Spirit descends from the heavenly Father upon him as the beloved Son of the Father (3:22). At the cross, Jesus Christ offers himself “by the eternal Spirit” to the heavenly Father on our behalf (Heb. 9:14) and the Father raised Christ from the dead “according to the Spirit of holiness” to save us (Rom. 1:4). Before his ascension, Christ instructs the church to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19) indicating that the God into whom we are incorporated at salvation is the Triune God, the one incomparable God who is eternally three. At Pentecost, Christ receives the Spirit from the Father so as to pour forth the Spirit onto all flesh, diversely throughout the peoples of the world so as to find expression in many tongues and contexts (Acts 2:4, 33). Indeed, only *God* can save us: “You shall acknowledge… no Savior except me” (Hos. 13:4). In this light, the fact that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are all involved in obtaining salvation for us means without question that all three are the one incomparable God.[[37]](#footnote-37) In the Spirit and in truth, the church glorifies Christ as Lord to the glory of the Father (John 4:24; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11).

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the one God who loves in freedom. To be free means in part that one does not do something out of need but purely from want and choice. That God loves in freedom means that God does not need creation to know perfect love because God is in all eternity perfect love as a communion of three. God did not need to create to be God and in loving us does not do so under the threat that our lack of reciprocation would in any way create a lack of fulfillment in the divine life. Perfectly fulfilled as a communion of love, God loves us in freedom which means out of grace and not necessity. Jesus’ reception of the Spirit at his baptism illustrates beautifully the communion of love that is God. Looking again at Christ’s baptism, we notice that the Father declares to him, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). At that moment the Spirit is poured forth from the Father upon him as if bearing free and abundant witness to the Father’s love for the Son. The Son moves forth in the power of the Spirit in devotion to the Father. The meaning seems clear. In this text, God is a communion of love in which the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and the Spirit is the bond of, and overflowing witness to, that love.

God is in fact a communion of love throughout eternity. The Father loved the Son “before the creation of the world” (John 17:24) and the Son loved the Father, sharing glory with the Father “before the world began” (17:5). The communion between them is eternally and unfathomably penetrating and intimate, as Christ said to the Father, “you are in me and I am in you” (17:21b). This interpenetrating communion has historically been called *perichoresis*. The Holy Spirit has commonly been viewed as essentially the freedom and “ecstasy” (overflowing abundance) of divine love that the Father and Son shared eternally with each other. The Spirit plays this role intentionally, interpenetrating the Father and the Son and they interpenetrate the Spirit as well. They delight in the Spirit and the Spirit in them as the three delight eternally in their communion of love. This communion has been called an eternal “dance” of interpenetrating love.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Let’s look more deeply into the eternal or immanent life of the Triune God. Though we cannot penetrate the inner mystery of God, we do have some clues from scripture about this divine inner life that allow us to say some things about it. A guiding light for probing the inner life of God is Christ’s statement that “as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:26). Since this statement starts with the very divine life inherent to the Father, it points to an eternal reality beyond time. Notice that the Son has the divine life “in himself” *as the Father does*. This is not a reference to the incarnation, since the comparison being made is between the life of the Son and the life essential to the Father, who is not incarnate. Notice that the divine essence or life of the Father and the essence or life of the Son are shared equally, the Son “has” divine life in himself as the Father does. Notice also that the Father grants this, meaning that the Father is its eternal source (without beginning). From this we can surmise that in eternity the Father shares the divine essence or life with the Son, *but* this does not make the Son essentially inferior to the Father, for the Son is granted to have life in himself *as the Father does*. The same could naturally be said of the Spirit who proceeds or “goes forth” from the Father (John 15:26).

The fact that all three persons obtain salvation for us, and only God can save (Hosea 13:4), there is no possibility that the Son and the Spirit are not truly divine. The heresy of *subordinationism* (that the Son and the Spirit are different from the Father in nature and are not equal to the Father in deity) is disputed by the biblical attribution of full deity to the Son and the Spirit, as I will defend further in my chapters on Christology and pneumatology. On the other hand, neither are the three divine persons mere modes of operation as *modalism* maintained. Some today inadvertently support this heresy when they liken the Trinity to a man who plays three roles, a father, a son, and a friend. To discover the error in this comparison, take note of the fact that the Father loved the Son before the worlds were made and created all things through the Son (John 1:1-5, 17:5, 24). Love cannot be shared between roles or modes of operation! Love is shared between persons. There is no question but that all three divine persons share the same divine essence and yet enjoy eternal communion as persons.

Yet, there is an order to the divine persons that does not imply any difference in rank or value. Historically, the church has recognized the Father as the *source* of deity and the Son as eternally *begotten* (or generated) from the Father without beginning. He is eternally “the only begotten God” (μονογενὴς Θεὸς or monogenēs theos) (John 1:18), which is loosely translated in the NIV as “one and only Son.” The term “begotten” is mysterious in meaning. We only know that it results in a filial (Son-like) relationship of the begotten One to the Father. The Son reveals the Father and enjoys communion of love and glory with the Father from eternity (John 17:5, 24). The Spirit is obviously not “begotten” of the Father since the Spirit is not a Son. The Spirit “proceeds” from the Father from all eternity (without beginning), “the Spirit of truth who *goes out* from the Father” (John 15:26). The Spirit is also said in the history of theology to be spirated or breathed forth from the Father, for the Spirit is figuratively designated the breath or wind of God; indeed, the wind blows where it pleases (John 3:8). The Spirit also has the divine life (is the divine life) *as the Father and the Son do*. Historically, the Spirit as the breath of God has been regarded as the bond, freedom, and ecstasy (overflowing delight) of divine love shared between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. But there is no hierarchy of essence or value here. It is just as fully divine to be the beloved Son and the free bond of love in the Spirit as it is to be the Father who is the fount or source of the divine life. “Only by virtue of the particularity and relatedness of all three is God God.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Interestingly, the divine life shared without beginning from the Father with the Son and the Spirit accounts for the unity of God. But the fact that this divine life is shared differently among the three (the Father as source, the Son through begetting, and the Spirit through procession or spiration) refers to the diversity of the three. God is one, but diversely so.

The church struggled early on to find the language to describe God’s oneness and God’s threeness. Thanks to the Eastern Cappadocian theologians of the fourth century (who came from Cappadocia in modern day Turkey), Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nanzianzen, and Basil, the church settled on the language of *essence* (*ousia*) for the oneness or unity of God and *persons* (*hypstases*) for the diverse relations of the three. When this language was first introduced in the fourth century, there was some push back. The Western theologian, Jerome, balked at the “newfangled” language of *ousia* and *hypostases*.[[40]](#footnote-40) This language is now fairly common among theologians. These terms, however, need to be used with caution. When we speak of the one divine “essence” that the Father, Son, and Spirit share in common, we are not talking about something abstract or impersonal that the three share in common and can exist somehow apart from them as if it were a fourth reality. No, the divine essence is living and personal, arising from the Father and shared diversely by the Son and the Spirit. It depicts the shared life of the three. Moreover, when using the term “persons” of the three, we do not mean something akin to three separate “people” each with their own “ego,” as in three separate people who act in unison today. That idea would be tritheistic (three gods) and would even imply finite gods since, as separate beings, they would border and limit each other. We refer to “persons” with regard to divine persons in a way unlike our normal use of this term. Though the three are eternally “conscious” of each other, they still share fully in one divine mind and will. The three are interactive modes of the one divine mind in eternal self-relation. They are thus distinct but not separable. And they are not people! God’s fullness is shown in the shared life of the three but also in each person in a way appropriate to that person. So, the Father is not one-third (or a “part”) of God but is rather the fullness of God as the source of the divine life. The Son is not one-third (a part) of God but is rather the fullness of God as the Son begotten of the Father. The Spirit is not one-third (a part) of God but is rather the fullness of God as proceeding forth in ecstatic delight from the Father.

It may be said that the theologians of the West stress the oneness of God and those of the Eastern tradition the threeness but this point can be exaggerated. More recently, the so-called social doctrine of the Trinity has become popular globally. This newer trinitarian doctrine views God as three seats of consciousness that share life through perichoresis or interpenetration. Social Trinitarians do not anchor the oneness of God in the person of the Father (referred to as the divine monarchy) as did the tradition of the ancient church. Contrary to the developing orthodoxy of the early centuries, they tend to view the monarchy of the Father as the eternal source of deity as implying the essential inferiority of the Son and the Spirit. But this conviction can cause a reliance solely on perichoresis for understanding the shared Triune life. One can wonder whether this understanding of divine unity is adequate to anchor the oneness of God. They also follow the method of reasoning from the life of Jesus to the triune life. The incarnate life of Jesus will naturally lead to a stress on the distinction and relationality of the divine persons. Moltmann connects the social doctrine of the Trinity to an egalitarian church fellowship and an egalitarian social and political ethic.[[41]](#footnote-41) Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff, is a strong supporter of the social doctrine of the Trinity, using it to anchor the quest for a just and loving society in the Trinity as its chief image or icon.[[42]](#footnote-42) Korean theologian, Jung Young Lee, finds in the concept of *yin* and *yang* an illustration of the Trinity, since they are contrasting ultimate principles that may also be said to comprise each other, as do the Father and the Spirit. The comprising or the “in-ness” of the two in one another is the third, which is symbolic of the Spirit.[[43]](#footnote-43) He also finds his Asian family to be a symbol of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the mother as the link of intimate relation between them, uniting them in her empathetic love. The feminine as symbolic of the Spirit unites the two masculine figures of father and son.[[44]](#footnote-44) So also A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya develops an African Trinitarian theology that rejects monotheism as unable to grant the relation of persons equal weight in the community of the Triune God, especially as the anchor to a just community on earth.[[45]](#footnote-45) These social understandings of the Trinity are intriguing but they require in my view the monarchy of the Father to anchor adequately the oneness of God. They also need to seek to understand the three persons as agents of consciousness of the one divine mind in communal self-interaction.

The Father as the sole source of the Son and the Spirit was a contentious topic of debate between the East and the West in the ancient and medieval church. Both traditions honored the Father as the source of the Spirit but the West added that the Son was the source of the Spirit too, the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father *and the Son* (*filioque* in Latin). The West in the Middle Ages added the *filioque* (*and the Son*) to the confession of the Nicene Creed that the Spirit proceeds from the Father so as to bolster the belief in Christ’s deity (if the Spirit proceeds from both the Father *and the Son*, it would be clear that the Son’s deity is equal to the Father’s). Though the Eastern churches also defended the full deity of the Son, they rejected the *filioque* out of the belief that only the Father is the *only* source of deity, a property unique to the Father as the person who anchors the unity of God. This difference was the major reason for the division between the church of the West (the Catholic Church) and the churches of the East (now called the Eastern Orthodox churches). There are compromise positions that have been suggested that have historical precedent in the Eastern tradition, such as maintaining that the Spirit proceeded eternally from the Father *through the Son*. The Catholic theologian, Thomas Weinandy, recently suggested that the Son was also eternally begotten from the Father *through the Spirit*.[[46]](#footnote-46) The Son is begotten eternally from the Father through the Spirit, who bears abundant witness of the Father’s love to the Son in eternally begetting him, and the Spirit proceeds through the Son back to the Father abundantly expressing in procession the Son’s love to the Father. Through it all, there is an intimate communion of love involving the three. In the perfect abundance and intimacy of the Spirit, the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father in perfect communion, a perichoresis of perfect love.

Besides the *immanent Trinity* in eternity described above there is also the *economic Trinity* revealed in time through the Triune missions. The circle of love that exists eternally in God by way of the processions of the Son and the Spirit from the Father is not meant by God to forever be a closed circle. It was God’s eternal will to be an *open and overflowing* circle that involves creation! Jesus’ prayer to the Father for his followers in John 17 reveals the goal of God’s opening the Triune life to creation. Jesus prayed for his followers “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:21). Such is the Triune mission of God! *May they be in us* *that the world may believe*! The church bears witness to the world of divine love in their communion together in God. Just as the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father in intimate communion, may humanity be in them to share in that circle of love, to let it transform them and shape their witness! The Father creates the world through the Son in the power and presence of the Spirit and then later sends the Son and the Spirit into the world to incorporate humanity as participants in the divine communion. The Spirit mediates Christ’s coming into flesh (Luke 1:35) as well as the Son’s victory over sin and death at the cross and the resurrection (Heb. 9:14; Rom. 1:4). Then the Son mediates the Spirit to all flesh at his exaltation so that those who are redeemed might gain passage to the life of the Spirit (Gal. 3:14). In the Spirit, we are united to Christ (Rom. 8:9) so that we may have communion with his heavenly Father.

There is a *correspondence* between the immanent Trinity in eternity and the Trinity present and revealed in time. As the Father is the *eternal* *source* of deity for the Son and the Spirit, so also does the Father send the Son and the Spirit into the world (John 3:16; 15:26). The Father is never sent. Likewise, as the Son is eternally begotten as the Son, so is the Son begotten in flesh. As the Spirit binds the Father and the Son in communion in free and abundant (ecstatic) witness, so the Spirit poured forth from the Father overflows the life of the Son in free and ecstatic witness at Pentecost giving rise to the many tongues that declare the wonders of God! In the end, the creation is transformed by the Spirit in the image of the glorious Son so that the Son may offer it up in glory to the Father, so that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:23-28).

*Final Reflection:*

“God is” and rewards those who seek the Lord above all else. On this path we learn that all of the hardships of this age, though sometimes hard if not impossible to understand, will be so outshined by the coming glory of the resurrection and the new creation that they cannot nullify its significance. Life will be shown to be worth it all because of God. We were made for God body and soul, so there can be no evil that will prove to be more significant to us or to our history than God. And in Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God. The reward of knowing God as we participate in the divine love will be vindicated as worth it all.

God exists necessarily. Since God is absolutely perfect in every way, there is no imaginable accounting of reality that might explain why God *would not exist* as the ultimate Ground and Telos (ultimate purpose) for all else. I can well imagine scenarios in which *I* would not come to be. My parents might not have decided to have me! I, along with the rest of creation, am contingent, dependent on the right conditions or the will of God to be! But God is not contingent. There is no condition that might explain why God would *not* exist. This means that God exists necessarily as the ultimate Ground and explanation of all else. God creates out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) so as to make creation the divine dwelling place. Created out of nothing, creation does not emanate out from God sharing the divine essence. Though God pervades all things, God is not the essence of all things. Only God is God.

God loves in freedom. God is perfect love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, God did not need to create or have fellowship with others to be God, to know perfect love. Neither does the refusal of humanity to love God cause a lack in God that requires healing or fulfillment. God creates and loves others freely, out of grace. Divine simplicity implies that God’s perfections are one. Thus, all of God’s attributes are properties of divine love. Holiness is infinitely holy love. Since God is infinitely pure, evil cannot seduce God and therefore cannot win. Wrath is a holy God’s response to evil, a rejection of evil driven by holy love for the very creation that evil is bent on destroying. Though passionate, divine wrath is more than anger; it is God’s handing humanity over to the wayward path that they chose for themselves. But God does so with a larger goal. God bears with sinners on their wayward path with the goal of drawing them to repentance and redeeming them. God hands the divine Son over to alienation and death so as to save them. Wrath has redemptive love as its goal. God reigns as Lord so as to free creation from the oppressive reign of evil. Divine sovereignty is thus not tyrannical; it is reigning love. Omnipotence is all-powerful love, omnipresence is a boundlessly present love, and omniscience is the loving God knowing all things while loving all things.

God is one as the one and only incomparable God. God’s oneness explains why absolute loyalty belongs to God alone. The one God is also three, which means that our loyalty to the incomparable God occurs in the context of loving communion in the divine embrace. God is one in essence but three in person. The Father is the ultimate source of deity as the one who loves, the Son is begotten from the Father eternally as the beloved, and the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father as the freedom and ecstatic delight of divine love. The divine persons enjoy communion in interpenetrating perichoresis. This immanent Trinity is revealed in time as the economic Trinity, whereby the Father sends the Son to redeem and the Spirit is sent through the Son to perfect creation in the image of the Son. The goal is that God is all and in all and the knowledge of the glory of God covers the earth as the waters cover the seas (Hosea 2:14).

Chapter 2 Questions:

1) What does it mean to say that God creates *ex nihilo*. Explain it also in relation to the belief in emanation.

2) Summarize the meaning of Romans 8:18-21 when it comes to the issue of suffering.

3) What is the central divine perfection? Explain this in relation to 1 John 4:7-10.

4) What is divine wrath? Explain it.

5) Briefly explain divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.

6) How is John 5:26 the guiding light for understanding the deity of the three persons in the inner life of the Trinity? Explain it.

7) Is the shared essence of God something impersonal and abstract? Are the three persons of God

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3. Ramirez, “The Border Church: La Iglesia Fronteriza,” https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=998951217224099 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yong, *Renewing the Church by the Spirit: Theological Education after Pentecost* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Oscar Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Heuser and Shawchuck, *Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving the People*; revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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14. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster-John Knox, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John Webster, “The Dogmatic Location of the Canon,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 1.1 (2001), 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 52-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ireneaus, *Against Heresies*, 4. 9. 1; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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19. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge University, 2003), 61–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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28. Italics are mine, Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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43. Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 212-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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